

The Eternal Spirit

October 1st

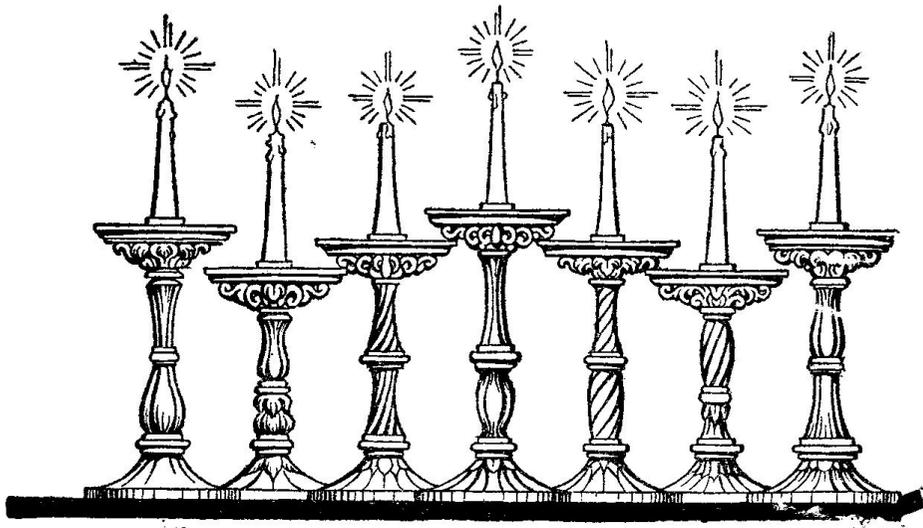
Revelation 4 vv 1-11

And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire, which are the seven Spirits of God.

I'm sorry to start with the difficult bits. I thought it would be good to continue our meditation on the Eternal Son by thinking of the Eternal Spirit. The concept of the Holy Spirit is quite hard to grasp. The fact that we usually think of Him as one (one person of the Holy Trinity) but that Revelation refers to Him as the sevenfold Spirit of God simply indicates to me how far beyond our understanding is God the Holy Spirit. Of course God is infinitely beyond our understanding. To know God is to know Him as Father, Lord, Creator, Redeemer; it is not to be able to define Him, which would be both impossible and blasphemous to attempt. God makes Himself known to us in Jesus and the Holy Spirit interprets Him to us. It is possibly because the Son bears witness to the Father and the Spirit bears witness to Jesus but no-one is said to bear witness to the Holy Spirit that He is the person of the Holy Trinity of Whom we find it hardest to speak. Don't worry about that. Silent worship, wordless adoration will do fine. I want this first day to clear up the Holy Ghost / Holy Spirit business. English derives from Germanic and Latin roots. Ghost comes from the German side of the family and Spirit from the Latin. There is a wide overlap in meaning, but they are not completely interchangeable. You don't go to the off-licence for a bottle of ghosts and you wouldn't describe a shy lover as having the spirit of a smile on his lips. In many cases, however, you can use ghost or spirit equally with the same meaning. When we use any word about God, it obviously does not mean quite the same thing as when we use that word about anything else. God is utterly different from everything else we know. God the Father isn't married to our mothers. So both spirit and ghost have a much richer meaning when they refer to the third person of the Trinity than they do in ordinary parlance. We might be tempted to give up the title Holy Ghost always in favour of Holy Spirit in the name of modernity and not frightening the children. I think it is generally a mistake to dumb down and to reduce our vocabulary. Ultimately, it diminishes our understanding. We would also have to give up a lot of good hymns such as this verse which I suggest you now pray.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures
here below,

Praise him above, angelic host, praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.



Bible Notes October – December 2016

October 2nd

Genesis 1 vv 1-5

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

It is easy to imagine that Jesus came into existence when the angel Gabriel visited Mary and that the Holy Spirit came into existence on that first Feast of Pentecost after Christ's Resurrection. A moment's reflection shows this to be wrong. *The Father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they be not three Gods: but one God* (from the Quicunque Vult which follows Evening Prayer in the 1662 Prayer Book). That's not a mathematical puzzle to test whether you have enough faith to believe the impossible. The whole point of Christianity is that God makes Himself known in Christ. If there were any aspect of God which was not incarnate in Jesus Christ, then God would not have made Himself known in Jesus and the Christian religion would be untrue. Either Jesus would be just a prophet or a great teacher (in which case we are no different from the Jews) or else He would be some sort of hybrid, part God, part man, one of the sort of mythical beings the pagans worshipped. Or else He was an angel, but even an angel isn't a perfect revelation of God. If Christian faith means what it says, Jesus is God. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is the same as Jesus and therefore the Holy Spirit is also God. He is the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Jesus is the paraclete or comforter (which I expect we'll come to in these notes) and the Holy Spirit is the other paraclete or comforter Whom Jesus promises to send when He ascends into Heaven, fulfilling the promise, *I am with you always, even unto the end of the world* (Matthew 28²⁰). *So the Father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they be not three Gods: but one God.* God is eternal and therefore we speak of *The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal.* God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit in all eternity. It therefore makes sense that the Spirit and the Son are present at the beginning of time, that they coexist in all time with the Father, and that God will still be Father, Son and Holy Spirit *When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more, And the morning breaks eternal, bright and fair; When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore, And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.* That was hard going, but the Church learnt to believe these things from her experience of worship of each person of the Trinity. *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.*

October 3rd

Genesis 2 vv 4-7

The words the bible uses for spirit and breath and wind considerably overlap. They are powerful. You can't see them. You can see their effects. They are intimately connected with life itself. You can feel them. It makes sense to think of the Spirit of God and the spirit of a human being in terms of life and strength and ultimately of love. God breathes His breath into the man he has formed from the dust and the man becomes a living soul. Mankind rejects the life God gives him in choosing the path of sin, but God sends Jesus to redeem us from our sin. When we have faith in Jesus, God pours out His Spirit into our hearts. *But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Jesus from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you* (Romans 8¹¹). *We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.*

Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love, and do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, breath of God, until my heart is pure,
Until with Thee I will one will, to do and to endure.

Breathe on me, breath of God, blend all my soul with Thine,
Until this earthly part of me glows with Thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, breath of God, so shall I never die,
But live with Thee the perfect life of Thine eternity.

October 4th

Exodus 31 vv 1-11

When the Israelites were finally allowed to leave Egypt, the Egyptians were so anxious for them to go after all those plagues that they loaded them down with treasures. When they came to Mt Sinai, God showed Moses the pattern of the heavenly tabernacle and they used the gold and precious materials to make the earthly tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant according to the pattern God had revealed to Moses. God enabled craftsmen like Bezaleel to do the necessary work by His Holy Spirit. God does give His people what we might think of as spiritual gifts to do His work, but all our talents and our opportunities are gifts from God. We should respect one another's gifts and use our own to God's glory and for the benefit of His Church and His world, to serve one another.

October 5th

Exodus 35 vv 30-35

Bezaleel and his co-workers were skilled craftsmen. They also taught others. That's part of our Christian calling, to pass onto others what God has given to us. Most basic is to teach the faith to our children, teaching them to pray, to know the Bible, to belong to the Church, to share their faith with others. Perhaps we have more specific skills to pass on – music, bell-ringing, cooking, embroidery, flower-arranging. Maybe we need to teach others to organise and run things. Whatever God has given us is for us to share. We need to expand our work, widening our appeal in the community. We need to pass it on to generations yet to come.

Angel voices, ever singing, round thy throne of light,
angel harps, for ever ringing, rest not day or night;
Thousands only live to bless Thee, and confess Thee Lord of might.

Thou who art beyond the farthest mortal eye can scan,
can it be that thou regardest songs of sinful man?
Can we know that thou art near us and wilt hear us? Yea, we can.

Yea, we know that thou rejoicest o'er each work of thine;
thou didst ears and hands and voices for thy praise design;
craftsman's art and music's measure for thy pleasure all combine.

In thy house, great God, we offer of thine own to thee;
and for thine acceptance proffer, all unworthily, hearts and minds
and hands and voices, in our choicest psalmody.

Honor, glory, might and merit, thine shall ever be,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, blessed Trinity!
Of the best that thou hast given earth and heaven render thee.

October 6th

Exodus 36 vv 1-7

The leader puts out an appeal for things needed to do God's work and the people have to be restrained from bringing too much. That is what I call a healthy church. The Spirit of God is among them.

*Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour, and the
majesty; for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.*

October 7th

Numbers 11 vv 4-9

And this is what I call an unhealthy church. They are not grateful for what God has done for them. They are not grateful for what He is doing for them now. They don't trust Him for their lives. They think that they would be better off as slaves in Egypt than as the free people of God. I think we'll pause here. Let's recall that this was actually the same church as the one in yesterday's reading – the children of Israel who had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt. The atmosphere in a church can change very quickly, just as we can change swiftly as individuals. Sometimes we are full of joy and the Holy Spirit, in love and charity with our neighbours, ready to offer our whole lives to God. Other times we feel curmudgeonly, our relationship with God is dry and empty, we're irritated by other people, we really don't want to share. The thing is to keep praying even when we don't feel like it, to keep the channels open to God, to do what we know to be right even when we don't really want to, to treat other people the way we would want them to treat us even if they do annoy us. It isn't hypocritical to behave nicely when we feel nasty or to worship when we're in a black mood. We're sincerely trying. We pray for ourselves and we pray for our Church if it gets a bit like the Israelites in the Wilderness in this reading, complaining, ungrateful, unloving. Only the Spirit can transform us as individuals. Only the Spirit can transform a church. If we are only too conscious of what's wrong with our church and with our fellow Christians, yes, pray for them, but pray for ourselves first. We're not here to judge and to condemn others, but to repent first of our own failings so that we may be instrumental in God's plans to transform the life of our community.

October 8th

Romans 6 vv 16-23

St Paul applies these thoughts to the Christian life. Whatever you live your life for, you effectively serve. You become its servant, slave even. You might serve yourself. You might serve the world. You might even serve sin and the devil. Whatever you devote your life to, you are slave to, and the wages of sin is death. On the other hand, you could devote your life to God. In that case you become the servant of God and His service is perfect freedom. It is always tempting to go back to serving yourself, or sin, the world and the devil. Paul reminds us that there is no joy in doing that, but the temptation is always there. The devil is the great deceiver. If, however, we live in the freedom of the Spirit, what we receive is God's gift of eternal life. Jesus said, *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Luke 12³²).

October 9th

Numbers 11 vv 10-15

In some ways, we clergy lead an idyllic life. I'm doing the job I believe God called me to do. I have many opportunities to take part in public worship, to pray, to study God's Word and to participate in the Sacraments. Pastoral work means working with people and sharing in God's love with them in the best and worst times of their lives. As we saw above, it is naturally to want to teach the skills and knowledge God has given us. Sharing the faith is what every Christian wants to do. We bear witness to Christian values in the community. As Rector of Cuxton and Halling, I live in a big house with a garden I love surrounded by some of the most beautiful countryside in the world. I also have almost total job security. I have every reason to be thankful.

But there are also pressures which perhaps other people either don't realise or think we can deal with from the inner resources they assume we must have as clergy. People don't listen when we preach the Word of God. They are not interested when we try to teach the faith. They treat the Sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood as a lower priority than various Sunday leisure activities. They treat Baptism as though it were an excuse for a party. We haven't the resources to provide the pastoral care we should like to. The Church is increasingly marginalised by secular society. Christian communities bicker over trivia and expect the clergy to sort them out. The issue of leadership is very muddled. Church's look to their clergy to lead them but then resist the leadership they are offered. There can be a complete lack of understanding between a vicar whose ideas about the Church are based in the Bible and its interpretation over 2,000 years of worldwide Christian tradition and a congregation whose loyalty has developed in one particular locality, based on personalities and relationships. A minister (the word means servant) of religion may feel that he carries all the responsibility with very little power and few resources. Prayer would be a good start.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels; Send down upon our Bishops, and Curates, and all Congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace; and that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honour of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ. Amen.

October 10th

Numbers 11 vv 16 & 17

A couple of years ago, I protested at an assumption that seemed to be being taken for granted in a clergy meeting – that the biblical model for ministry is egalitarian ministry teams with team members representative of the wider community (male & female and, in the modern context possibly, of different races and maybe even sexuality). If you read the Bible, however, it is much more commonly the case that God sends an individual (usually, but not always, male) to lead His people. The person concerned is endued by the Holy Spirit with the appropriate gifts for the task God has assigned him. Any team is very much in the background. Assistants very often misunderstand or let down the leader. The nearest you get to a team ministry in the Bible is Paul and his companions, but it is certainly not an egalitarian team. Paul is very much the boss, as he should be, because he is the one who has the gifts for leadership. John Mark gets the sack when he doesn't live up to Paul's standards. Some women work with Paul, although generally he says they should not exercise authority in the Church. All Paul's helpers were almost certainly Jews and it is very unlikely that any of them were in any kind of relationship other than heterosexual marriage. The twelve apostles certainly did not form an egalitarian team with Jesus, Whom much of the time they completely misunderstood.

And yet, these great leaders are upheld and supported by others in the background. Probably, clear directional leadership can only be delivered by powerful individuals like Moses and Paul. You can't really imagine a committee instigating a vision and initiating a great movement. When great ideas do emerge in councils or synods, they are usually led by individuals who have a dream and the capacity to inspire others. The committee can then draw on the insights and capabilities of all its members to advance what becomes a common purpose, even though it was originally the vision of one man. More commonly perhaps (or am I being cynical?) a committee will resist being led in a new direction and other individuals will compete for the leadership role by opposing whatever is being proposed.

Moses can't lead the Israelites into the Promised Land on his own, even though He is gifted with the Spirit. Neither does he alone have the Spirit. God gives His Spirit to the 70 elders (Moses' PCC?), but it is the same Spirit. Leader and council should be working together for the same end.

October 11th

Numbers 11 vv 18-23

It would be tempting to gloss over these verses. The people will be punished. They had rebelled against God and the leader God had appointed. They had doubted God's ability to care for them and considered that they would be better off as slaves to sin, the world and the devil than serving the One Whose service is perfect freedom and there will be consequences. We shouldn't assume that we can treat God and His Church as though they didn't really matter and get away with it. God is everything or He is nothing.

October 12th

Numbers 11 vv 24-30

When it says that they prophesied when the Spirit came on them, presumably this is something like what we call speaking in tongues in the New Testament and in Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches and movements throughout history. It is one manifestation of the Spirit. Some Christians think that all Christian people should have this gift. Moses seems to think it would have been a good idea too for all the people of God. St Paul, however, describes it as a lesser gift even though he wishes it were given to all Christians. He also draws a distinction between speaking in tongues and prophesying because prophesying is intelligible to other people. It's all in I Corinthians chapters 12 – 14 which we might come to, but never lose sight of the fact that the greatest of all the gifts of the Spirit is love.

Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost, taught by thee we covet most,
of thy gifts at Pentecost, holy heavenly, love.
Love is kind and suffers long, love is meek and thinks no wrong,
love than death itself more strong; therefore, give us love.
Prophecy will fade away, melting in the light of day;
love will ever with us stay; therefore, give us love.
Faith will vanish into sight; hope be emptied in delight;
love in heaven will shine more bright; therefore give us love.
Faith and hope and love we see, joining hand in hand agree,
but the greatest of the three, and the best, is love.
From the overshadowing of thy gold and silver wing
shed on us, who to thee sing, holy, heavenly love.

October 13th

Numbers 11 vv 31-35

The manna is a foretaste of Jesus the Bread of Life. It is also a foretaste of Holy Communion in which we receive Jesus the Bread of Life. The Israelites had grown tired of the Bread of Life. They had lost faith. They had demanded to be fed on meat. They would rather have lived as slaves and eaten what the world eats than live as the free people of God nourished by the Bread of Heaven. The gift of God is eternal life, but the wages of sin is death. Is there a lesson for us here when we want to live the same kind of lives as people in the world and neglect the things of God? It is in Jesus that we have eternal life and the things of this world cannot satisfy. So surely our priorities ought to be worship and prayer, Word and Sacrament and the things of this world should take second place.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His
glory and grace.

October 14th

Deuteronomy 34 vv 1-12

One off charismatic leaders tend not to have successors. In fact, succession is often the biggest problem when an effective leader dies or resigns. Tito in Yugoslavia would be a good reasonably recent example. He held the country together, but it split apart in violent civil war after his death. Less bloody, we have the example of our own political parties, who have found it hard to replace strong leaders like Lloyd George, Churchill, Thatcher, Atlee and Blair. Solomon succeeds David fairly successfully in the Bible. Joshua follows Moses, but I can't think of any others except the two we shall look at tomorrow and Sunday. Sometimes, it's because the job's done and there's no need for a successor. Sometimes it's just that no-one good enough can be found. Joshua receives the spirit of wisdom (The Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Who is the Wisdom of God) by the laying on of hands. The laying on of hands signifies the passing on of God's Spirit right down to the present day. Joshua has to complete Moses' work. God says to him: *as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. Be strong and of a good courage* (Joshua 1^{5&6}). I don't suppose any of us will have as public a vocation as Joshua, but we all have our own calling and I'm sure what God promises Joshua, He also promises us, the Holy Spirit to empower us in our Christian walk.

October 15th

II Kings 2 vv 1-15

There are parallels between Moses and Elijah. One could be said to represent the Law, the other the Prophets – the two great pillars of the Hebrew Bible. Moses had a vision of God on Mt Sinai. Elijah had an experience of God on Mt Horeb, which is another name for the same mountain. Moses died while his work was incomplete and Joshua inherited both his task and the spirit which was in him. Elijah too ends his life on earth with his work still incomplete and God has commissioned him to anoint Elisha as his successor. Anointing also signifies bestowing the spirit right down to the present day. Elisha asks for a double portion of the spirit which is on Elijah and he receives it when Elijah's mantle falls down to him. Moses divides the waters of the Red Sea. The other three all divide the waters of the Jordan. Moses and Elijah of course meet Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and discuss His Exodus, His Crucifixion, at which the gift of the Holy Spirit is signified by the water which pours out of His side mingled with blood when the centurion pierces Him to prove that he is dead. The water of life flows from the death of the One Who invites everyone that is thirsty to drink from Him.

We're feeding on the living bread, we're drinking at the fountainhead;

And whoso drinketh, Jesus said, shall never, never thirst again.

What, never thirst again? No, never thirst again!

What, never thirst again? no, never thirst again!

And whoso drinketh, Jesus said, Shall never, never thirst again!

October 16th

Luke 24 vv 36-53

Joshua completed Moses' work. Elisha completed Elijah's work. In both cases, they needed the spirit which only God could bestow. But who is commissioned to complete Jesus' work? We are, the Christian Church? And what resource do we need in order to carry out God's command?

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.

October 17th

Judges 14 vv 1-20

As a mild-mannered Anglican, I'm not comfortable with stories like this one. Perhaps my life is too comfortable and that's the point. We are not, thank God, at war or oppressed by a foreign power. I don't face any real danger or hardship and neither do most of my readers. So it's hard for us to think that someone like Samson was a good man, doing a worthwhile job and that God had called him to it. We might just stomach verse 6 when the LORD's spirit enables him to kill a lion, but we are very uncomfortable with v19 when the LORD's spirit inspires him to slay 30 Philistines. But, what if we were an oppressed people? What if we were at war? Would we be pacifists and turn the other cheek or would we support armed resistance? If we'd lived in France during the Occupation, would we have submitted peaceably to Nazi rule or would we have blown up their trains and assassinated their senior officers if we had had the chance? If we had chosen armed resistance, would we have prayed to God for success in killing our enemies and protecting us from their weapons? These are hard questions, but I am sure it is true to say that we should never undertake any task if we cannot with a good conscience ask God to bless us with success. Prayer is aligning our minds with the mind of Christ. So what would Jesus do? To be honest, I don't know. What I do know is that, in the light of what we read about in the papers and see on TV, I do pray fervently:
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.

October 18th (S Luke)

Judges 16 vv 21-31

I've been watching a series of programmes about the Battle of the Somme in 1916. There were horrors in Gath three thousand years ago, horrors in Picardy a hundred years ago and there are horrors in the world today. Such is human nature and such are the consequences of our rebellion against the love of God. How does God respond to human sin? One answer is that He fights for justice. Surely the millions of innocent victims of innumerable atrocities deserve someone to protect them, someone to punish their persecutors. Another answer is that He shows mercy to us sinners and He does not mete out on us the punishments we deserve. Justice and mercy. On first consideration, justice and mercy are on opposite sides, fighting against one another for the souls of men. As we grow closer to God,

however, we recognise that justice and mercy are just aspects of the greater reality, love. We can't resolve the righteous demands of justice and mercy, but God resolves them on the Cross, where justice and mercy meet in the ultimate out-pouring of divine love, a stream of blood and water which atones for all our sins, cleanses us of all our filthiness, and wells up within us, a fountain of life.

Almighty God, who calledst Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist, and Physician of the soul: May it please thee that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 19th

I Samuel 4 vv 1-22

The Israelites were fighting the Philistines. God wasn't with them because they were unfaithful to God. When they lost the first round, they mistakenly thought that if they took the Ark of the Covenant with them into battle, they would have God with them. They were mistaken and they lost the battle, the lives of the two faithless priests who had led them astray and the Ark itself. One of the things that troubled me about the Somme programmes was the character of the British C in C, Sir Douglas Haig.

Assuming that it was a fair portrayal, Haig was not especially competent, but he was absolutely ruthless, not caring how many of his own men or of the enemy died and not caring how he killed them. He was also a religious man, a regular churchgoer, and definitely believed that God was on his side. If this is accurate, Haig had obviously failed to comprehend much of the Gospel message and yet, there he was, in a position of great power in a supposedly Christian nation. It makes you think about how careful we have to be to remain open to God even if we think we have all the right answers and to pray for those who bear heavy responsibilities and face tremendous temptations.

Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mould me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.

October 20th

I Samuel 10 vv 1-13

From the time Joshua brought them into the Promised Land, the Children of Israel had no real centralised authority. There were local judges. They all looked to the Ark of the Covenant as signifying the presence of God among them. In time of emergency, God raised up judges to deliver the whole nation – people like Deborah and Samson. Samuel judged Israel and his two sons looked like being unworthy successors. There was also the threat of war with the Ammonites. The Israelites decided that they wanted to be like the nations (= gentiles) and have a king. This could be interpreted as rejecting God (Who is the true King of Israel) and His appointed prophet, Samuel. It is putting their trust in the institutions of this world rather than in God. They are prepared to sacrifice their freedom under God because they believe that worldly solutions to their problems are more reliable than God. God does, however, agree that they should have a king and Saul is chosen. Like our own Queen, he is anointed to signify the giving of the Spirit, but the evidence is in his prophesying as it was in the case of the 70 elders who were chosen to work with Moses. *Is Saul also among the prophet?* becomes a saying in Israel. Prophesying or speaking in tongues inspires both awe and ridicule in the people who observe it.

October 21st

I Samuel 16 vv 1-23

Saul started off well. He was a humble man. He was generous. He was obedient to God. Later on, he lost his way. He became arrogant and cruel. He lost his faith and became disobedient to God. God decided to replace him with David, *a man after his own heart*. Like Saul, David is anointed and receives the spirit for the task of kingship. But Saul is said to receive an evil spirit. The bad man becomes worse. From him who has not is taken away even that which he has. We might guess at a diagnosis of mental illness. The point of the bible story is that there is nothing that happens which is outside the providence of God. There seems to be chance in the world. We certainly do make decisions of our own free will. Satan exists. Yet, in the end, it is all in God's Hands. His Will cannot be thwarted. We are answerable for what we really do choose to do with our lives, but God is in control of everything that happens. (And you thought the Trinity was hard to understand!) If there were no free will, there would be no justice. How could you fairly be rewarded or punished for what you couldn't help doing? If God were not in control, we couldn't know that all will be well.

October 22nd

I Samuel 19 vv 18-24

Saul became increasingly jealous of David and decided to kill him. David took refuge with Samuel in Ramah. The troops Saul sent to arrest David and finally Saul himself were seized by the spirit and forced to prophesy. They became helpless and the objects of ridicule. *Is Saul also among the prophets?* I'm not sure what the lesson of this strange story is. Perhaps it is that we should treat the things of God with more reverence and care than we sometimes do.

October 23rd

Acts 8 vv 1-13

Some people think that the Acts of the Apostles should have been called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. V8 says, *And there was great joy in that city*, just what you would expect where the Holy Spirit is at work. Another Saul has consented to the death of Stephen and set about destroying the nascent Church, but the Lord and Giver of Life is intent on building that Church. In fact Saul will become Paul, the wise master builder.

O God, who, through the preaching of the blessed Apostle Saint Paul, hast caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world: Grant, we beseech thee, that we, having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may shew forth our thankfulness unto thee for the same, by following the holy doctrine which he taught; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 24th

Acts 8 vv 14-25

I think that what is probably meant by the words that they had not yet received the Holy Ghost is that the Samaritan converts had not manifested themselves the signs and miracles which Philip had performed. If they hadn't received the Holy Ghost at all they wouldn't have been able to confess Jesus as Lord and accept Baptism. But they didn't prophesy or speak in tongues or work miracles, which were all ways in which the Holy Spirit was active in those days. My judgment on the question I hope you are asking is that the Holy Spirit does not generally work in those ways all the time and is more usually known through the fruits He produces in human hearts: *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance*, but that He does perform miracles on occasion in every age, including our own and we should remain open always to the possibilities of God.

October 25th

Acts 8 vv 14-25

Further on these verses, Simon Magus had been someone of importance in the Samaritan community. He was respected and exerted power. When Philip preached Jesus, he was impressed, but it seems that his nose was put out of joint when Peter and John laid hands on ordinary believers and they found that, in the power of the Spirit, they could do all things. Peter and John had democratised religion and thereby undermined the status of the self-important. They brought the true power of God whereas Simon had been something of a charlatan. Simon offered to pay for the grace which God had given to Peter and John. He had completely misunderstood what grace is. It's free, not valueless, but priceless. God gives His Holy Spirit to all those who ask Him in faith. To seek to buy the Spirit, to seek to control the Spirit, to seek to use the Spirit to your own selfish ends is mistaken and dangerous. Buying or selling what God gives for nothing is the very serious sin of simony and a cash-strapped Church always has to be very careful to avoid any suggestion that we can make money or raise funds by offering to pray for people or that God is more likely to answer prayer if we make or promise an offering or to charge for Sacraments. I'm not hugely comfortable about charging for weddings and funerals, but I go along with that long-standing tradition on the basis that we are paying for the legal aspects of the ceremony and the time and effort of people like musicians and bell ringers. I'd never turn away anyone who couldn't pay, however.

October 26th

Acts 19 vv 1-12

I rather like this ad hoc approach. These days, we'd be expected to start with a mission plan and carry out risk assessments and fill in all sorts of paperwork before we even began. Maybe we avoid making mistakes but there is truth in the saying that the man who never made a mistake never made anything. Inexpert evangelists (Apollos? Cf 18²⁴⁻²⁸) had preached an incomplete version of the Gospel, omitting the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Paul put things right and laid hands on them after they were baptised in the Name of Jesus. The rite of Confirmation is traced back to what Paul did here and what Peter and John did in Acts 8, the laying on of hands to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit to the baptised. Paul preached in the synagogue, where it might be expected that a respected Jewish teacher would speak, but moved to a school when he became unwelcome in the synagogue. He improvised. God wrought great miracles which bore witness to Jesus.

October 27th

Isaiah 11 vv 1-9

This prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus. The Spirit comes upon Him in the form of a dove at His Baptism. The nature of the Spirit Who (or which?) comes upon Jesus without measure is indicated in v2. These very same words become a prayer in the Confirmation service, when the bishop lays his hand on the baptised person, signifying God's gift of the Holy Spirit to every Christian and praying that every Christian will abide in Christ and be fulfilled with the Spirit Who (or which?) fulfils Him.

God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year:
God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near;
nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

From utmost east to utmost west, where're man's foot hath trod,
by the mouth of many messengers goes forth the voice of God;
give ear to me, ye continents, ye isles, give ear to me,
that the earth may filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

What can we do to work God's work, to prosper and increase
the brotherhood of all mankind, the reign of the Prince of Peace?
What can we do to hasten the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

March we forth in the strength of God, with the banner of Christ unfurled,
that the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world:
fight we the fight with sorrow and sin to set their captives free,
that earth may filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

All we can do is nothing worth unless God blessed the deed;
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide till God gives life to the seed;
yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

October 28th (S Simon & S Jude)

Jude vv 1-3

In the creed, we say quite a lot about God and Jesus, but, when we come to the Holy Spirit, the Apostles' Creed seems to content itself with, *I believe in the Holy Ghost*, and even the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed which we use at Holy Communion only has, *We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets*. (We usually call it the Nicene creed, because the words about Jesus were added to the Apostles' Creed at the Council of Nicaea in 325, but the teaching about the Holy Spirit was not added until the Council of Constantinople in 381 and this is the more correct version of the name.) Anyway, the point is that everything which follows *I believe in the Holy Ghost* depends on the Spirit – the holy Catholic Church, the Communion of saints, the Forgiveness of sins, the Resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

O Almighty God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made an holy temple acceptable unto thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 29th

Ezekiel 1 vv 1-28

I just wanted to share with you an excellent article I have just read by Mark Hart in *Faith and Worship*. He emphasises the absolute otherness of God and warns against the tendency we have to try to limit Him in our understanding. God is greater than anything we can imagine. Essentially He is different from anything we can think of. He is not a being, not even an infinitely marvellous being. He is being. He is not so much infinitely good as goodness itself. He is not beautiful; He is beauty. None of the words that we use about God can be adequate. All our thoughts fall far short of conceiving of Who He is. We should either keep silence and worship Him in awe or we should use all the good epithets we can think of, knowing that none of them is enough, but multiplying them to an infinite as we try to express our praise for the infinite God. Even the language of the Bible is limited, because God limits Himself to communicate His Word in our language. Jesus limited Himself to become one of us to make God known to us. Just saying. Don't worry if all this is beyond what you can understand. You'd be a fool if you thought you could comprehend God.

October 30th

Acts 19 vv 13-20

This is almost like comic relief. The sons of Sceva think they can use what Paul has got for their own ends, but the grace God has given Paul is to God's glory and to serve the needs of the Church and the world. To seek to use the Spirit selfishly is to misunderstand the Spirit and it will always have disastrous consequences.

What we do in our churches – public worship, meetings, social events, service to the wider community, pastoral work, evangelism, must never be for our own selfish ends, but to the glory of God and to achieve His purposes in the world. Worship isn't about doing what we like, but what God likes. Meetings aren't an opportunity to establish our status or to get our own way, but to discern the Will of God for our community. Social events are about innocent joy, not simply means to ends such as fund-raising, as necessary as that is. The Church seeks to serve the community just because God so loved the world, not to enhance the Church's status or in order to make us feel good about ourselves. Pastoral work is an expression of love, without any ulterior motive such as bringing the person into the pews on a Sunday or making us feel significant. Evangelism is sharing the good news to the glory of God and for the benefit of the hearer, not a desperate attempt to build our numbers so that our church can survive a little longer.

The strange thing is that it is a Church which looks at things that way round that will actually grow both in number and in stature.

October 31st

Psalm 48

You probably know a chorus based on this psalm. Someone once told me how he made the mistake of remarking to his church's organist that there were two rather similar tunes to these words and it wasn't clear which the organist was playing! The sense of the psalm is the wonderful power of God and His Love which enfolds His people. We can trust absolutely in His faithfulness. We exist to praise Him. An aspect of our worshipping God is that we are a loving community, building one another up in the faith once delivered to the saints. Tactless comments about one another's efforts may not always be the best way to do that.

November 1st (All Saints Day)

Psalm 67

I'm working through the psalms set for Whitsun or Pentecost in the Book of Common Prayer and in Common Worship. The lists overlap, but they are not quite the same. Psalm 67 can be sung as alternative to the Nunc Dimittis at Evensong and there is also a hymn based on it, *God of Glory, God of Grace*. It's all about how God pours out the abundance of His blessings upon us, personified in the Holy Spirit, setting up a virtuous circle in which we respond to His grace with praise, our blessings and praise serve as a witness to the world of the greatness and goodness of God, and the world is set free by repentance and faith to receive the grace of God and all in response to prayer.

O Almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord: Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 2nd (All Souls)

Psalm 68

I wonder what effect reading Psalm 68 has on you. First of all, it is puzzling and perplexing. What does it all mean? Don't worry that you can't make sense of it. Biblical scholars have the same trouble. Even the Hebrew is difficult. If you read it very carefully and in small sections, you can work out what most of it is about, but even then it's hard to connect the sections together. It's overwhelming. Which is my point in a way. Intellectually, this psalm is very difficult to grasp, but it does have strong emotional impact. This psalm is very moving. It may leave the brains of many of us befuddled, but it stirs the heart. It is a vision of the greatness of God. So back to Mark Hart. His article is based very heavily in the first of the 39 Articles of Religion: There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. This is the mystery about Whom we can say nothing or about Whom we attempt to say everything. Psalm 68 lays it on with a trowel, using metaphor upon metaphor, because all language about God must be metaphorical or we can say nothing and just worship in silent awe.

November 3rd

Psalm 68¹⁸

I will look at a couple of verses from this psalm which may be the reason why it is appointed for Whitsun. *Thou are gone up on high, thou hast led captivity captive, and received gifts for men.* St Paul sees this verse fulfilled in the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. Leading captivity captive is Jesus binding the serpent, chaining the devil, who, until, Christ's death on the Cross set us free, had all creation bound in slavery to sin and the fear of death. Having triumphed over sin, the world and the devil, Jesus at the Right Hand of God bestows the Holy Spirit with all His gifts on the people of God.

November 4th

Psalm 68¹³

Though ye have lien among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove: that is covered with silver wings, and her feathers like gold. There are many possible interpretations of this verse and the verses either side of it. This is one interpretation in the light of the Gospel. While God did indeed overcome the gentile armies ranged against ancient Israel, the real, eternal significance is that God overcomes the hosts of Satan for all eternity. The pots referred to may be a reminder of slavery in Egypt. God redeems His people from slavery to sin and death. The filthiness of the rubbish heap on which the pots are thrown may signify the filth of sin from which Christ washes us clean by the shedding of His Blood. If people live (*have lien among*) on rubbish heaps because they are in dire poverty (which they do), we are reminded here that God pours out His riches upon us in Christ and through the Spirit. The dove is an emblem of peace. Christ has made peace between man and God and between man and man. She was the sign that the waters had abated and that Noah was safe to leave the Ark, having being delivered from the Flood, just as we are delivered from the wrath of God in the waters of Baptism. She represents purity and cleanliness, the gifts of God to us sinners whom He sprinkles with the fresh water of the Holy Spirit. The dove represents the Spirit. Maybe the silver and gold are the riches of Christ, freely given by God to all who approach with faith and love. I think Bishop Christopher Wordsworth had this psalm in mind when he wrote:

Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost, taught by thee we covet most,
of thy gifts at Pentecost, holy heavenly, love.
From the overshadowing of thy gold and silver wing
shed on us, who to thee sing, holy, heavenly love.

November 5th

Psalm 133

The Gunpowder Plot was of course an attempt by Roman Catholics to mount a coup against the Anglican state established under King James I and the English Parliament. Those on the Protestant side, the Puritans, were not all that happy with James and the Anglicans either, but, it would not be until the reign of James' son, Charles I, that they would take up arms against the king.

Love is kind and suffers long, love is meek and thinks no wrong,
love than death itself more strong; therefore, give us love.
Things have gone very wrong when Christians attempt to kill one another over matters of doctrine. It isn't that the differences aren't important. There are reasons why we can't yet agree with one another about all the things that divide us, but what unites us – faith in Jesus Christ – is more important than anything. Christians are the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, a fellowship of love. I'm sure we can all agree that there is no question of murdering or torturing people we regard as heretics anymore. But I also hope we can agree to treat people who disagree with us courteously and to listen to them respectfully and to pray sincerely with Jesus that we may be one.

November 6th

Psalm 87

This is another psalm I find difficult. Speculating about why it has been appointed for Whitsun might help us to understand its significance for Christians. We can take God's love for Zion as a sign of His love for the Church, the new Jerusalem. God is the guarantor of Jerusalem, the Holy City at the heart of ancient Israel in the Old Testament and of the Church in the New Testament dispensation of eternal life for people of all nations who believe in Him. Her security is in her holiness, that gift which God gives us of His grace setting us free that we may live in accordance with His commandments. This is the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ, *binding all the Church in one.* Various other nations are recorded as recognising the supremacy of the LORD, perhaps a prophecy that all nations will one day know Him as Judge or Saviour, depending on their openness to His grace. Some people think that the words about one born there are a prophecy about Jesus who was born at Bethlehem near Jerusalem. The wise men actually expected him to be born in the city.
Prophecy will fade away, melting in the light of day;
love will ever with us stay; therefore, give us love.

November 7th

Psalm 33

In my last parish, I used to choose Sunday's hymns in the proceeding week and give them to the organist in time for choir practice. I like spontaneity. However, musicians like time to practise and, when I came here, I was asked to do what my predecessor had done and prepare the hymns weeks in advance, which I do. I try to choose hymns which fit in with the theme of the service, the time of year (say Christmas or Easter), and the appointed Bible readings. I try to mix up the familiar with the new, ancient and modern. I try to make some allowance for who is likely to be at a particular service, to choose hymns children might know when they're likely to be there (a diminishing number of children and a diminishing number of hymns they might know, it is sad to say), and to choose long enough introit and offertory hymns to process in and take the collection! Sometimes, I ask the choir to choose the hymns, which broadens the field from which they are drawn. I'm happy to take suggestions from the congregation, but with notice if possible, please. I don't like changing what I've already put effort into organising or singing hymns just because we like them even if they aren't appropriate. A little while ago I was asked for an extra hymn and my first thought was to sing it in place of the psalm. But the psalm was 33, one of my favourites and I couldn't bring myself to drop it. So we had slightly more in our service that week than we usually do.

The psalm encourages us to rejoice. *Joy in the LORD shall be your strength.* Jesus came that we might have an abundance of joy. *Rejoice in the Lord always.* We worship Him because He is. We praise Him because we can trust Him, because He is just and merciful, because He is our Creator and Redeemer. *Let all the earth fear the Lord: stand in awe of him, all ye that dwell in the world.* The LORD holds the life of everyone of us in His Hands. He and He alone can save us. He is our life in this world and in that which is to come. By God's grace, we seek Him. By His grace, we find Him. In Him we lack nothing and our lives are filled with praise, a witness to the world.

Faith will vanish into sight; hope be emptied in delight;
love in heaven will shine more bright; therefore give us love.

November 8th

Psalm 139

Many years ago, I was cycling from here to a meeting at Hever. It's quite a climb out of Tonbridge and then right off the main road and up to the High Weald, before descending to Penshurst and climbing again over the ridge to Hever. It's beautiful countryside and I enjoy cycling very much, exercise in the open air. But, for some reason, there was something playing on my mind, probably some problem to do with parish politics, which have always defeated me. This psalm came to mind, about God's individual love for me, how He is everywhere, wherever I may go, whatever I do, whatever might happen to me, how He made me the person I am, how His providence sustains my life and how, by His grace, I shall dwell in the House of the Lord for ever. I hope you feel that too.

Faith and hope and love we see, joining hand in hand agree,
but the greatest of the three, and the best, is love.

November 9th

Psalm 36

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rumour has it that this hymn was such a favourite of one of my predecessor's as rector, that his organist got fed up with it, a fact which makes me a bit wary of choosing it too often. Not only does it take up the theme of this psalm, but doesn't it chime in too with what we've been saying about the unutterable greatness of God?

November 10th

Psalm 150

Common Worship also sets Psalm 150 for Pentecost, this great paean of praise which concludes the entire Book of Psalms. By the Holy Spirit, we praise God and worshipping God is the greatest joy we can experience. We worship not only in our church services and our personal prayer, but in every thing which we do in His Name and there is nothing that we do that cannot be done in His Name. *Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine.*

November 11th (Armistice Day)

Psalm 145

Imagine saying or singing this psalm on the battlefield. How hard it would be *to give thanks in all things*, but what a difference it would make if we could find the grace to do so. Surely, it would encourage our faith and steadfastness if we could think of God's faithfulness in the past, the mighty acts He has done and His promises to be faithful now and hereafter. We would be reminded of the importance of passing on what we know of God to generations yet to come (something we are signally failing to do). Thinking about God's character, we would find solace in His loving individual care for us. We would also be reminded of the tragedy of war. God also loves the enemy. Wouldn't we vow, that, if God brings us through this, we will try to find better ways than war to sort out our differences? Even on the battlefield, we could look around us at the wonderful works of God and their inevitable destruction in war would surely cause us to lament and to repent of the sins which lead us into conflict. We'd look to the Lord to sustain and protect us. We would rely on His justice and mercy. Surely we would depend on Him in prayer. *There are no atheists in a foxhole.* We would rely on Him that righteousness would finally prevail.

November 12th

Psalm 104

This is the Pentecost psalm *par excellence*. The Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life. The psalm celebrates all that God has done in Creation and the way all life depends on Him. It has been said that 104 celebrates God's work in creation and 103 His work in redemption, but they are one, God's free gift of life in this world and the next, through Jesus, His Wisdom and Word, and through the Holy Spirit, Who brooded over the waters when God said, *Let there be light* and springs eternally from Him Whose Blood was shed for us.

November 13th

Deuteronomy 16 vv 1-18

There were three great feasts in ancient Israel, each one with tremendous significance as a remembrance of what God has done for us, a sign of His continued Presence among us now and for the future and a reminder of our dependence on Him and our obligations towards Him. It's important to note that "remembrance" in this sense really means "participate in". We are the people who received these blessings. We are the people whom God blesses today. We are the people Who eternally bless His holy Name for all that He is and all that He does. A group of Christians I once belonged to maintained these feasts even today. Nowhere in the Bible does it tell us to stop doing so. It is a worthwhile thing to do as those of us who have celebrated Passover meals on Maundy Thursday well know. Most Christians don't keep the Jewish feasts, however. Jesus did tell us to observe one rite (generally assumed to be carried out every Sunday) to do this in remembrance of Him. All the above about past, present and future blessings is even more true of the Christian Eucharist than of those OT feasts prescribed in this chapter.

November 14th

Deuteronomy 16 vv 9-12

Easter corresponds with Passover, historically and theologically. Pentecost comes from the Greek for 50. 50 days after Easter is the feast of first fruits, the beginning of the Harvest. God sends His Holy Spirit. The Church is inspired to preach the Gospel. People hear and believe and are saved. Made one by the Spirit, one with God the Holy Trinity and one with God's people, they do God's work in the world, looking forward to the harvest at the end of time when God's people will be gathered into His Kingdom.

November 15th

Deuteronomy 16 vv 13-15

God gives life to the seed and, in God's time, the crop comes to fruition. Tabernacles recalls the fragility and temporary nature of our life on earth. It celebrates God's gifts to us, all the things we need for life on earth, including, above all, His Law, which is ultimately made manifest in Jesus Christ. It celebrates Harvest Home, when God's people will take their places at His eternal banquet.

O blessed is that land of God, where saints abide for ever;
Where golden spread far and broad, where flows the crystal river:
The strains of all its holy throng with ours today are blending;
Thrice blessed is that harvest song which never hath an ending.

November 16th

Ezekiel 36 vv 25-38

It's unbelievable really. We all know that the washing machine won't work unless we follow the maker's instructions. Admittedly, some of us haven't the patience to read the instructions. But, usually we have to come back to them or rely on somebody else to explain them. Yet you can go out on Sunday morning and you see dozens of people walking, running or cycling. There will be thousands at boot fairs and thousands more at Temples of Mammon such as Bluewater. There will be hundreds of children playing sport with the full support of parents and teachers. To sustain all this activity, for many people Sunday will be just one more working day. And, by and large, church congregations are small and declining and aging. The human condition is pretty desperate and it serves us right because we have turned our backs on God. The only thing that will save us is that God loves us despite our indifference or even hostility towards Him. He alone can save us. He will save us, not because we deserve to be saved, but because He loves us. By His Holy Spirit, He enables us to be born again, to be washed clean and to make a fresh start in Him. Will the world hear His Voice or is it only a faithful remnant that will be saved?

November 17th

Genesis 11 vv 1-10

The story of the Tower of Babel is read at Whitsun because it is the very opposite of the Pentecost story. At Babel mankind, proud of his own self-sufficiency, believes that he can attain to the height of God by his own rebellious powers. God destroys the tower and disperses them and causes them to speak different languages, to limit the potential for evil of which the very powerful human race is capable when it sets itself up against God. At Pentecost, God sends the Holy Spirit onto the Church, onto those who have repented of their sin and turned to Christ and been baptised in His Name, in order that they may proclaim God's message of repentance and forgiveness and a fresh start in Him. The Spirit binds us together in one. The Spirit breaks down the barriers between us. Pentecost undoes Babel. It all depends on what has wrought in Jesus Christ. Our part is to repent and believe the Gospel.

November 18th

Joel 2 vv 21-32

In Hebrews 11⁶ it says, *But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.* Atheists obviously don't believe in God. Deists believe in God, but they think of Him as something out there that doesn't make much difference to life on earth. Agnostics hedge their bets. They can ignore the possibility of God when they want to, but turn to the hope that he might exist when they're in trouble or dying. Theists believe that God is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. So in which category do we place all these good people who have better things to do with their time than to participate in the life of the Church and better things to do with their money than to support her? Isn't exactly *diligently seeking* God, is it? Joel sees God as very much active in the world today and he is granted a vision of what God will do in the world yet to come. Joel would strongly advocate diligently seeking God in penitence and faith. Either God is everything or He is nothing. If we believe that He is, it makes no sense at all if we don't diligently seek Him.

November 19th

Micah 4 vv 1-7

The reversal of Babel indeed. I suppose the question I am asking is how much do we care? If we want to be part of what God promises here through Micah, then surely we have to seek Him diligently. We have to love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves. Christ and His Church have to come first in our lives. In everything we do, we need to be working in, through and with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the reason that Christianity is declining in modern Britain is simply that we have become too complacent and treated the practice of religion as a leisure activity rather than as what it is, our life's work.

November 20th

Romans 8 vv 1-17

When I was a medical student, forty odd years ago, my neighbour in college was a new convert to Christianity. He was filled with the Holy Spirit – to an extent that was sometimes embarrassing. One day, his father died very suddenly, a tremendous shock to all the family. My friend, the new Christian, read this chapter at the funeral. It meant so much to him.

November 21st

Romans 8¹

This is the point. You are either a Christian or you're not. If you are a Christian, your sins are forgiven in Christ and you are filled with the Holy Spirit. Your life is a walk in the Spirit. Jesus Christ really is your Lord. God is your heavenly Father. There is no possibility of compromise with sin, the world and the devil. You would prefer a martyr's death to letting Jesus down. Christians aren't complacent.

November 22nd

Romans 8 vv 1-3

So, how can we be right with God? God is just and it makes sense that good people are right with God and bad people aren't. That's very worrying if you know that you are a sinner. You measure yourself against the person you ought to be and you despair. It should be more worrying if you don't know that you are a sinner. That just shows that you have set the standard too low. Complacently we assume that we are respectable members of society and that that is good enough for God. Only it isn't. God requires that His people are not merely respectable. He demands that we are holy. So we should all come under condemnation. The revelation that Paul has received is not that it doesn't matter that we aren't holy; it matters very much. Just look at the world around you to see the effects of human sin. What Paul has understood is that God loves us just as we are, sinners that we are. *There is therefore now no condemnation.* God has dealt with our sins by the Death of Jesus. Through faith in Him and repentance, we are set free from sin, washed clean, born again. We don't have to worry about justifying ourselves against the standard of some external law, constantly worrying about whether we are playing by the rules. We are holy because Christ has sanctified us. He has set us free to live holy lives, dedicated to Him.

November 23rd

Romans 8 vv 4&5

Being a Christian means living in the Spirit. There's no room for compromise with sin, the world and the devil. We can't live after the flesh, our ordinary human nature. We couldn't justify ourselves by being good because we aren't good. Having been set free from sin, neither can we live as slaves to our ordinary human nature. We are better than that.

November 24th

Romans 8 vv 6-8

Jesus said both that if you were not for Him you were against Him and that if you were not against Him you were for Him. It's one thing or the other. You either belong to Jesus or you don't. There's no third way, no compromise. It was the same in the Old Testament. There are only two ways, the way of life and the way of death. There is no other possibility. There's no Christianity lite in which you give part of your life to God, in which Jesus is the Lord of some aspects of your personality. You are for Him or you against Him and, if you are for Him, that has implications for what you do with your time, talents and even your money.

November 25th

Romans 8⁹

Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

It's plain enough. Most of you reading this, I assume, have the Spirit of Christ. He is the determining factor in your life. Everything you do, you do in Him. Some of you may not have the Spirit of Christ. It's easy to tell. Do you acknowledge Jesus as Lord? If you do, you have the Spirit. If you don't, what you have to do is to repent of your sins and to put your trust in Him. Once you acknowledge, by his grace, that Jesus is your Lord, you become a son or daughter of God and an heir of eternal life. If we have the Spirit, however, it follows that we obey Him and accept His lordship of every area of our lives. There is no room for complacency or compromise with the world.

November 26th

Romans 8 vv 10&11

The thought is that in Baptism we are crucified and buried with Christ. The old man, the flesh, sin, they have all been put to death with Christ on the Cross. We are set free to live the risen life of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Writing these things, I am only too aware of how far short I fall and you are no doubt aware too. But that is no reason either to give up in despair or complacently to accept mere respectability rather than true holiness. We shall not be made perfect until we get to heaven, but, in the mean time, we seek those things which are above, repenting of our failures and praying for grace to grow into the people God made us to be. God enlivens (or quickens, less ambiguous but slightly old-fashioned) us in this world and in that which is to come.

November 27th (Advent Sunday)

Romans 8 vv 12&13

Advent looks forward to the coming of Jesus. He comes as our judge and our saviour. We all look forward to Christmas. When we sing the carols, this year, we shall once again proclaim and celebrate what God has done in Christ, *Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled*. We look to the Jesus Who comes into our hearts every day to make us fit to stand before Him on that great day when He comes again to judge both the quick and the dead.

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

November 28th

Romans 8 vv 14&15

So many people look on religion as though it were a restriction on our lives. They think the message is that, if we obey the rules now, we shall be rewarded hereafter. They also often think that the rules are onerous and that keeping them would severely limit our opportunities to enjoy ourselves. Nothing could be farther from the truth. On the analogy of a wealthy Roman household, we are not slaves, but sons. We can do what we like. As good sons, what we like to do is what our Father wants us to do, both because we love Him and honour Him, and also because we know that if we live by the wisdom He imparts to us, we shall live happy, fulfilled lives, that will be a blessing to other people and also to us. If we know that is what the Christian faith is all about, we ought to share that information with people who think it's all about making you do what you don't want to do.

November 29th

Romans 8 vv 16&17

Then there's our experience of God. Admittedly that feeling of closeness can come and go. Maybe we've withdrawn ourselves from God because we are filled with resentment or other sinful thoughts or because we have become too busy or too selfish. Maybe God, in His sovereign love for our own good, is withholding that knowledge of Him which we would like. But we've all experienced God and what he shows us is what we are.

November 30th (S Andrew)

Romans 8 vv 16&17

My great uncle Albert (a royal marine who served in both world wars) used to quip that in a battle there were only two classes of people – the quick and the dead, those who were fast enough to get out of the way of incoming and those who weren't. It's true (in the other sense of *quick*) of the whole human race. There are just two classes of people – the quick and the dead, Christians, who are quickened by the Spirit of Christ, children of God now and in all eternity, members of His household, and heirs, with Jesus, of His Kingdom, and the rest of humanity, those who do not know God. Those of us who know Him need to live as what we are here on earth in preparation for heaven, and we have a duty to share what (Whom) we know with the world.

Almighty God, who didst give such grace unto thy holy Apostle Saint Andrew, that he readily obeyed the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him without delay: Grant unto us all, that we, being called by thy holy word, may forthwith give up ourselves obediently to fulfil the holy commandments; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 1st

Romans 8¹⁸

The Whitsun reading actually finished at v17, but I cannot not finish this wonderful chapter. Life as the children of God isn't always easy! How did the world treat Jesus? He warns us to expect that the world will treat us the way it treated Him. We should expect to suffer for Him. Moreover, Christians experience their share of illnesses and disappointments, problems and pains. He didn't promise us easy lives. We do know that Christ is with us in all our troubles and we also know that what we may suffer on earth doesn't even compare with the joy which shall be ours in all eternity.

December 2nd

Romans 8 vv 20&21

These and the next two verses are very difficult to comprehend. Our understanding of God is just too limited. The point is that the whole of Creation is redeemed in Christ. It is not just that we human beings are saved. Everything that is is fulfilled in Him Who redeems and sanctifies everything God has made. Jesus is worthy to receive honour and power divine; And blessings more than we can give be, Lord, forever Thine. Let all creation join in one to bless the sacred name Of Him that sits upon the throne and to adore the Lamb.

December 3rd

Romans 8 vv22&23

Remember. Pentecost is the Feast of Firstfruits. It is the beginning of the Harvest, not the end. Christ is the firstfruits of the Resurrection. He is the beginning of the Harvest and the guarantor of its completion in the redemption of the whole of Creation. We too are among those firstfruits, truly part of the Harvest, and also tiny signs that God is surely completing His work in the Church and in the world today. The Spirit too is firstfruits, the beginning of the Harvest and its guarantor, working in the world to accomplish God's final purposes. Elsewhere (Ephesians 1^{13&14}) St Paul says to us Christians, *ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.*

Christ is risen, Christ, the first fruits of the holy harvest field, which will all its full abundance at his second coming yield: then the golden ears of harvest will their heads before him wave, ripened by his glorious sunshine from the furrows of the grave.

Christ is risen, we are risen! Shed upon us heavenly grace, rain and dew and gleams of glory from the brightness of thy face; that we, with our hearts in heaven, here on earth may fruitful be, and by angel hands be gathered, and be ever, Lord, with thee.

December 4th

Romans 8 vv 24&25

Alleluia, alleluia! Hearts to heaven and voices raise:
sing to God a hymn of gladness, sing to God a hymn of praise.
He, who on the cross a victim, for the world's salvation bled,
Jesus Christ, the King of glory, now is risen from the dead.

Alleluia, alleluia! Glory be to God on high;
Alleluia! to the Saviour who hath gained the victory;
Alleluia! to the Spirit, fount of love and sanctity:
Alleluia, alleluia! to the Triune Majesty.

We don't yet see. We live by faith, not sight. We live in hope of the final consummation; we have not yet received it in all its fullness. But we do catch glimpses. We do experience something of what it is to worship God in all eternity. I think this hymns puts some of that into words as well as any human being is likely to be able to.

December 5th

Romans 8 vv 26&27

Sometimes life is a struggle. It is even a struggle to pray. God feels distant. We feel low. We may even feel that God doesn't care, that He can't or won't help us. You're not alone when you feel like that. Plenty of good people in the Bible felt the same way. Just read the psalms. The great comfort, however, is that even when we are completely unable to pray, God Himself is praying for us in the person of His Holy Spirit. He knows all about us and lays what we need before the Throne of Grace. However you may feel, you are never abandoned. God is with us, Emmanuel. Pray for the grace to trust in Him, if you can't pray any more than that.

December 6th

Romans 8²⁸

I'm just going to pause writing these notes while I cook my Saturday dinner. While I'm doing so, I shall listen to one of Radio 4's money programmes. Some evangelists suggest that this verse of the bible means that you will never go short if you are a Christian, that you'll never fall sick, that you'll have a perfect family life. It's what's called the prosperity gospel and it's complete rubbish. For one thing such an interpretation of this verse would contradict much of what Paul has been saying earlier in the chapter. God certainly does look after us in this world, but He gives us what He knows is good for us, not necessarily what we should like. Topol might sing *Lord who made the lion and the lamb, You decreed I should be what I am. Would it spoil some vast eternal plan? If I were a wealthy man.* But we can assume that the answer to his question is "yes" if we remain poor and if we are rich to remember from Whom our riches come and use them accordingly.

December 7th

Romans 8 vv 29&30

A somewhat protracted lunch break included the beginning of *Any Answers*, where they were discussing education. One caller mentioned that every child was in some way gifted. I wondered whether the caller was religious? If she didn't believe in God, who gave children this gift? If, on the other hand, we are simply the products of evolution (the operation on natural selection on chance variation), why should we expect everyone to be special? Surely chance variation would throw up a number of rejects who would be weeded out by natural selection. If we are gifted, however, by God, why does He gift some of us the gift of knowing Him and others not?

December 8th

Romans 8 vv 29&30

Well, we obviously can't leave it there, but I'm not sure how much farther I can take it. Go back to the infinite greatness of God. God exists in eternity. Perhaps we should say Eternity is God just as love is God and goodness is God. All perfections are found in Him. God exists in time and space but time and space are the creation of God and He infinitely transcends them both. Everything is present reality to God. Indeed all reality depends on Him. Without God, there would be nothing, including no time or space. Thus, God's care for us here and now is His care for us in all eternity, His care for us before time began and His care for us *when time shall be no more*. It follows that, as Christian people, the elect of God, we know that everything about our lives depends on Him and we know that we can utterly depend on Him because He loves and cares for us eternally. It doesn't depend on our own efforts. Chance isn't involved. God is not capricious to play fast and loose with us. We don't have to earn His favour. It all depends on God and God is utterly dependable. This has been described (XVIIth Article of Religion) as *full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and to such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ...* It raises the question, however, what about those whom it seems that God has not predestined to salvation? What happens to them? And why hasn't God chosen them? Paul offers some answers in chapter 9, but really, understanding this is beyond us mere human beings. We are free beings and yet everything is controlled by God's Providence. The XVIIth Article of Religion concludes: *Furthermore, we must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in holy Scripture: and, in our doings, that Will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God.* That's all we can do really.

December 9th

Romans 8 vv 31&32

These are comforting verses whatever happens to us in life. God loves us so much that Jesus died for us. He died for you and He died for me. Given that the Almighty Ruler of the Universe loves you that much, what can there be to be afraid of?

December 10th

Romans 8 vv 33&34

We've seen how the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ intercedes for you and me at the Throne of the Father. Now we see how Christ Himself intercedes for us. The Blessed Holy Trinity is one in the divine purpose – the creation of everything that is, the redemption of everything that is, the sanctification of everything that is.

Laud and honour to the Father, laud and honour to the Son,
Laud and honour to the Spirit, ever Three and ever One,
Consubstantial, co-eternal, while unending ages run.

This is doxology – glorifying God for Who He is and what He does and it's the highest activity of which created beings are capable, ultimately the only possible fulfilment of our human potential.

December 11th

Romans 8 vv 35-39

I cannot think of words for the wonder of being so loved by God. Let the words of the Bible suffice. But, thinking about them, the point is obvious. God is everything or He is nothing; we are for Him or against Him. There can be no such thing as a half-hearted faith. Of course, there is such a thing as a weak faith, even a struggling faith, but there is no such thing as a faith which is content with half measures.

Happy are they, they that love God, whose hearts have Christ confest,
who by his cross have found their life, and 'neath his yoke their rest.

Glad is the praise, sweet are the songs, when they together sing;
and strong the prayers that bow the ear of heaven's eternal King.

Christ to their homes giveth his peace, and makes their loves his own:
but ah, what tares the evil one hath in his garden sown!

Sad were our lot, evil this earth, did not its sorrows prove
the path whereby the sheep may find the fold of Jesus' love.

Then shall they know, they that love him, how all their pain is good;
and death itself cannot unbind their happy brotherhood.

December 12th

I Corinthians 12 vv 1-13

Not long ago, I was taking Communion to a resident of the Abbeyfield Home behind St Matthew's Church at Wigmore. This was the epistle and I was reminded of reading the same epistle when I served at 8.00 Holy Communion at St Matthew's more than forty years ago. I believe that my gifts, the person the Holy Spirit has made me, fitted me to serve and then to become an ordained minister and to do many other things in the Church and in the world. Initially, I became a server because, when I tried to join the choir, they felt that the Holy Spirit had not bestowed on me the gift of singing. One door closed and another opened. I'm sure that all we Christians have our gifts. Each one of us has his or her part in the work of Christ's Church. The Church suffers and so do we as individuals if we undervalue other people's gifts and if we undervalue our own. We are none of us more or less important. We are all part of the Body, members one of another, and are called to work together to the glory of God. If we are too lazy, too busy with other things or too lacking in confidence to do what God wants us to do, we are unfulfilled as people and the Church is that much less able to function. If we diminish other people's contributions, we are guilty of spiritual pride, which is bad for our own well-being, and we deprive the Church of their services. If we go our own way, forgetting that we are members one of another, we diminish our own contribution and the contribution of others. It's recognising the gifts God has given to each one of us, humbling thanking Him for them and using them in His service.

December 13th

I Corinthians 12 vv 27-31 and all of 13

Romans 8 and I Corinthians 13 in one Bible Study. We only need Isaiah 55 and John 17 and my joy will be complete. Again, there's not much more to say really. The greatest gift of the Spirit is love. Love determines how we use all the other gifts which God may give us. That may mean our skills, our time, our possessions, our money. Everything comes from Him. It is of His own that we give to Him. Without love what we have to offer is nothing. With love, we offer everything. Love defines what sort of people we are. Love is that wherein we shall dwell in all eternity. O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth: Send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee. Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

December 14th

Galatians 5 vv 16-26

Walking Tommy the other day, I was discussing with him his article in the September parish magazine. Being a dog, he hasn't yet learnt to use a keyboard. So I have to type it up for him. He knows I love to see him running free across the fields and through the woods and he proposed to write these words, "He loves to see me bounding without boundaries: free, joyful, fun-loving, faithful, friendly, full of love, fulfilling my Maker's intentions for me. He says he would like to see human beings also free, joyful, fun-loving, faithful, friendly, full of love, fulfilling their Maker's intentions and he could tell them how they could be through faith in Jesus Christ, only they won't listen to him." I think he was saying something along the lines of what S Paul means here. If a dog is vicious, you muzzle him and keep him on a lead, but that doesn't really solve the problem. The dog isn't free, doesn't like being muzzled and people are still afraid of him. What you need is a good dog and a good dog can run free. It's the same with people. Without God, we are vicious and need to be controlled by the law, but the law doesn't solve the problem. It doesn't make us good. It doesn't make us happy. We still think and speak and act in accordance with our vicious natures. What is needed is that we should be made good. Only Jesus can make us good. When Jesus makes us good, we are set free to live life in the Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life.

There is a green hill far away, without a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all.

We may not know, we cannot tell, what pains he had to bear,
But we believe it was for us he hung and suffered there.

He died that we might be forgiven, He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven, saved by his precious Blood.

There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.
He only could unlock the gate of heav'n and let us in.

Oh, dearly, dearly has he loved! And we must love him too,
And trust in his redeeming blood, and try his works to do.

December 15th

Acts 2 vv 1—11

Associating with Pentecostals when I was a youth, we quite often had to read these verses out loud. Pronouncing the names of the places the apostles' audience came from was always a bit of a challenge. But this is the event which causes some people to refer to Whitsun as the Church's birthday, the day it all began. *They were all with one accord in one place.* The Church was united. There weren't many of them but they were one in Christian fellowship and love. They were filled with power from on high. Few as they were, they lost any fear or shyness they may have had and went out onto the streets to preach Jesus. In the Gospels, the apostles often seem to have misunderstood Jesus. They kept getting things wrong. Now, however, it says: *the Spirit gave them utterance.* Inadequate as they were (being human like us) the Holy Spirit told them what to say and gave them the courage and the skills to speak on behalf of Jesus. The curse of Babel was undone. Men were no longer to be divided by language because they were evil and likely to conspire in wickedness; now they were to be united in love to sing the praises of Him Who has called us out of darkness into His own marvellous light. People from all those different countries would return home with the Gospel message, beginning the worldwide mission of the Church. The story of Pentecost is always held up as an example of what God can achieve through us despite our being few and weak. If we are wondering how He might use us today, perhaps the lessons are that the apostles met as one, that they were observing the feast, they were faithful even if they were unsure, that they were prepared to let go and let God and that they were ready to submit to His Will for their lives.

December 16th

John 14 vv 15-31

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.

John's Gospel is extremely simple. Even the Greek is the easiest Greek in the New Testament. Yet, John's Gospel is extremely profound. Dare I say, infinitely profound? John and Jesus as recorded by him plumb the very depths of God's nature. There is something intensely spiritual about reading these words, especially John chapters 13-17. The words I quote above come twice in John 14. They are words we all need to hear.

December 17th

John 7 vv 37-39

The occasion is the Feast of Tabernacles – Harvest Festival, a celebration of the Law of God, an anticipation of God's Kingdom, a reminder of the frailty of our earthly life and utter dependence on God because the people left the security of their houses and lived in tents during the festival as their ancestors had dwelt in tents as they journeyed through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Palestine is a dry land and a lot of it is desert, but where there is water, there is an abundance of life. So the Spirit is the Lord and giver of life. He will bring in the Harvest. He inspires us to live in the love of God and to walk in accordance with His commandments of justice and mercy. He will establish God's Kingdom. He will be our Comforter in our earthly pilgrimage. The thing to think about is that the life-giving Spirit becomes freely available to us because of the death of Jesus. Self-sacrificial love is the greatest power of all.

December 18th

II Corinthians 5 vv 1-10

I wonder if St Paul had the symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles in mind when he wrote this? Or is it that Christians nowadays understand Tabernacles in the light of Jesus and the teaching He inspired Paul to give? Our true home is in Heaven. Far from fearing death, we should approach death with joy. What we have now is temporal, limited, by time and space. What God promises us is for ever. The Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance. We shall all be judged by God. Our hope will be in Christ Jesus and Him crucified.

December 19th

II Corinthians 5 vv 11-21

If we know these things, we are constrained by the love of Christ to share them with other people, with the whole world. We are made new in Christ. We are born of the Spirit. We are the children of God. In fact, we are a new creation, the firstfruits of the renewed creation of the entire cosmos. We may not feel like it. It is true that *the flesh lusteth against the Spirit*, even in Christians. All this, however, is what we really are. Let go and let God. If we do that, we find that we are set free to fulfil our vocation as ambassadors of Christ. In Him, we are reconciled to God, one in the Spirit, and, just by who we are, we bear witness to God's work of reconciling the world to Himself.

December 20th

John 20 vv 19-23

The Holy Spirit, of course, is the Spirit of Jesus. He is the Spirit of the risen Christ. He is the Spirit of God. Formally, our Church speaks of Him in these words: The Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is of one substance, majesty, and glory, with the Father and the Son, very and eternal God (Vth Article of Religion). If you ponder them, these words must be true, insofar as any human language can speak truly of God. But, for most of us, our experience of the Spirit is dynamic, rather than philosophical. The Spirit is dynamite! He is power. He is the power of God, Whose inspiration makes us want to do what God wants us to do with our lives. He is also the One Who enables us to do what God wants us to do with our lives. [Incidentally, don't write off the philosophical. Philosophy is love of wisdom. Wisdom is an essential character of God. To love wisdom is to love God.]

December 21st (S Thomas BCP)

John 20 vv 24-29

Do you ever feel you've missed out somehow? When I first went to King's London, all the new students were supposed to meet at an informal reception before some more formal introductory talks on why we were all there and how we were going to proceed. The informal gathering was an opportunity to get to know people and make friends. It was the end of the Summer of 1976 – the year of the drought. So I was quite unprepared for the cloudburst which erupted just prior to my arrival. I went in, soaking wet without discovering that we were supposed to be meeting one another, and went straight to my room, where I spent the time drying out until the formal part of the programme began. I sometimes felt that I never did catch up with the others in the friendship stakes. We might feel a bit left out too if other people seem to have a much more profound relationship with God than we have. They have deep spiritual experiences. Or they are always evidently loving and hospitable. Or they do good works for which everyone admires them. Maybe we think we're the only person in the fellowship who lacks all these qualities. Or maybe we think the others are a clique which excludes us. Thomas was the odd one out, but Jesus counted him in.

Almighty and everliving God, who for the more confirmation of the faith didst suffer thy holy Apostle Thomas to be doubtful in thy Son's resurrection: Grant us so perfectly, and without all doubt, to believe in thy Son Jesus Christ, that our faith in thy sight may never be reprov'd. Hear us, O Lord, through the same Jesus Christ, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, now and for evermore. Amen.

December 22nd

John 15 v26 – 16 v15

Most of us probably know that the Holy Spirit is described by Jesus as another paraclete. The word paraclete is sometimes rendered comforter and sometimes rendered advocate. The Holy Spirit makes us strong (fort). The Holy Spirit speaks on our behalf, especially at the Throne of Grace. If the Holy Ghost is another paraclete, who is the original paraclete? The answer, of course, is Jesus. Jesus is our comforter and advocate. He is the Way the Truth and the Life. The life-giving Holy Spirit leads us in the Way of Truth. The Trinity is one in Creation, Redemption and Sanctification. As the Quicunque Vult puts it, *Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost*. Given that all this is so, any portrayal of God which is inconsistent with what we know of Jesus must be false. The presence or absence of faith divides Christians from the rest, the Church from the world. There really is judgment and the only way to God is through Jesus Christ. He is always with us everywhere in His Holy Spirit to lead us in the way of life everlasting, which could not be the case if He were only Emmanuel (=God with us) in the person of one particular man in Palestine Who lived on earth 2,000 years ago. Given His presence us with us always, we are set free, we are empowered to witness to the Truth of Christ to the whole world so that, as He prophesied, all men would be drawn to Him Who was lifted up on the Cross for our salvation.

December 23rd

Acts 10 vv 34-48

God is no respecter of persons.

Yesterday, we thought about the distinction between the Church and the world, those who have faith in Jesus and those who don't. When Peter was a young man, he would have distinguished Jew from Gentile, the people of God descended from Abraham as opposed to the nations of the world. Through the Holy Spirit, God shows Peter that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. *God is no respecter of persons*. The Church is open to everyone. Everyone may approach God through faith in Jesus Christ and repentance – Jew and gentile, male and female, bond and free, citizen and barbarian. *God is no respecter of persons*. Respecting persons is something we may have to guard against ourselves. Are we sure that everybody is welcome in our churches, that anybody may become a Christian? There is no place to discriminate between people on the grounds of race, class, status, wealth, worldly importance or anything else.

December 24th (Christmas Eve)

John 3 vv 16-21

This is given as the reading for the Monday in Whitsun week and yet it is so appropriate for Christmas. The work of the Son and of the Spirit is one. It is also the work of the Father – the Creation, Redemption and Sanctification of all that is. And yet, human beings have a choice. They can come to the light and receive everlasting life as the free gift of God. Or they can lurk in the darkness because their deeds are evil. They condemn themselves. Maybe they will not bring their evil deeds to the light because they are ashamed of them. We are all sinners and we all have something to be ashamed of. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us: but, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* (I John 1^{8&9}). If we are ashamed of ourselves, the remedy is to confess our sins to God. He will and does forgive and our sins are washed away. We don't have to worry about them anymore. They are gone for ever. We are clean and we make a fresh start in Him, free from sin and its consequences. But maybe, they are not really ashamed. They lurk in the dark because they have no wish to repent of the sins which divide us from God and from our human beings, the sins which alienate us from the Creator and from the creation. Many people have no intention of repenting of their selfishness and everything that follows from it. All I can say to people like that is, ask yourself what you get out of living a self-centred life? Aren't you condemned always to feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled in the time of this mortal life and doomed in all eternity? If you can recognise that truth, turn to God while there is still time.

December 25th (Christmas Day)

Luke 1 vv 26-38

Almighty God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin: Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

It is the Spirit Who enables Mary to become the Mother of God and the Spirit who enables us to be the children of God.

December 26th (S Stephen)

Acts 7 vv 55-60

Stephen was one of the seven deacons (=servants) appointed by the apostles to relieve them of waiting at tables! The early Church shared all its possessions and the apostles had been distracted from their work of preaching the Word by complaints that some weren't getting their share. So they chose seven men *full of the Holy Ghost* to sort out the administration. We may observe that in the Church today it might be a good idea to seek Spirit filled administrators to run the meetings and to do the paper work, leaving the clergy free *that they may both by their life and doctrine, set forth thy true and lively Word, and rightly and duly administer thy holy Sacraments.* It seldom seems to work out so neatly. We never hear of the deacons waiting at tables. The Holy Spirit has more important work for them as evangelists. Stephen preached Jesus with wonderful effect, so much so that he aroused the wrath of those who were opposed to the Christian Way. On the other hand, clergy continue to get bogged down in administration, all the more so in this overly bureaucratic, risk averse C21. Anyway, Stephen is brought to the point where his opponents are going to kill him. He is still full of the Holy Ghost. Because of the work of the Comforter, He sees Jesus, He has the grace to commend His life to Jesus and He can even pray for His persecutors just as Jesus did. The Holy Spirit enables Stephen to see Jesus and to be transformed into His likeness. Seeing Jesus as He is, Stephen is made like him. Seeing face to face, he knows Jesus as Jesus knows him. And we're not told this in order to make us think that Stephen was a very much better Christian than we could ever be. We are told all this so that we have faith enough in God to imitate Stephen and imitate Jesus in whole-hearted, self-sacrificial love.

Grant, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon earth, for the testimony of thy truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed; and, being filled with the Holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors by the example of thy first Martyr Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to thee, O blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God to succour all those that suffer for thee, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen.

December 27th (S John)

Revelation 1 vv 1-20

John receives his revelation a few decades after Stephen's martyrdom. The forces of evil have been unable to quench the Spirit. Indeed the blood of the martyrs (=witnesses) has proved to be the seed of the Church. The Cross of Jesus overcomes all the power of the Evil One. John himself is now an exile on the island of Patmos. He is writing to seven churches in Asia Minor which themselves face persecution, as do many Christians in the world today. Jesus is the first martyr. He is the King and High Priest, anointed by the Holy Spirit. He is the Messiah and fulfils all the prophecies in Himself. Through the shedding of His Blood, we receive His Holy Spirit and we too are anointed. We are kings and priests to God in service to the world. There are tough times ahead for Christians. Jesus says, *Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also* (John 15²⁰). However, there will be judgment. There is justice. Christ will return again and His saints will be vindicated. What is required of us is that we remain faithful. By the power of the Spirit, John is granted a vision of Jesus, the Son of Man. He was dead. He lives. He has overcome death. He holds the keys to death and hell. The message is *Fear not*. We can trust Jesus for our life on earth and in all eternity. He is in the midst of the churches and each one has its own angel to care for it. The gates of hell will not prevail against God's Church. This is our heritage. We can draw many contrasts with life in our churches and the churches in Asia nearly 2,000 years ago, but essentially we are the same. We have the same Lord, the same mission, the same Spirit, the same earnest of our inheritance. No less is required of us than was required of them. God is no less faithful to us than He was to them because God is infinitely and eternally faithful. What we have to do is to work out what God wants of us today and, by His grace, to do it.

Merciful Lord, we beseech thee to cast thy bright beams of light upon thy Church, that it being enlightened by the doctrine of thy blessed Apostle and Evangelist Saint John may so walk in the light of thy truth, that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 28th (Holy Innocents)

Jeremiah 31 vv 1-17

What were the big moments in Israel's history? There was Abraham being told by God to go and live in the land of Canaan which God would give to his descendants for ever. There was the return to the Promised Land under Moses at the time of the Exodus from Egyptian slavery. Then there was the return from Babylon to the Holy Land of those exiles who had been deported by King Nebuchadnezzar when he had besieged and destroyed the City of Jerusalem and God's Temple there. The Exodus and the return from exile are parallel. God delivers and redeems His people. He brings them through the wilderness to freedom in the Promised Land. Jeremiah is writing here about the exiles, assuring them that they will return. It is because of our human faithlessness (the worship of false gods, the violence and dishonesty, the indifference to the needs of the poor and vulnerable) that judgment has come and the city is in ruins. More powerful than our human faithlessness, however, is the faithfulness of God. He does not abandon His people. Certainly, there is justice, and there is also mercy. God does not revoke His promises. He does not abandon His people even though we turn our backs on Him.

Exodus, Return from Exile, they both prefigure God's redemption in Christ of the whole human race, not just the Israelites. The Father redeems us and delivers us from slavery to sin and the fear of death. Christ is the Passover Lamb. He is the Bread from Heaven, the living water and the rock from which it flows. The Holy Spirit guides and sustains us on our journey through the wilderness of this world, leading us home to the new Jerusalem, our Promised Land in heaven, the earnest of our inheritance.

This reading is chosen today because of the bit about Rachel weeping for her children. Rachel was the wife of Jacob (called Israel by God). She was the mother of Benjamin and Joseph and died at Bethlehem. Jeremiah speaks of her weeping for her great, great, great, grandchildren when Nebuchadnezzar laid waste to the Holy Land. Matthew speaks of her weeping for her great, great, great, great grandchildren when Herod has the boy babies in Bethlehem killed in a futile effort to destroy the Christ child.

Read on also verses 31-34 about the new covenant which is fulfilled in Christ when God puts His Spirit in the hearts of His people.

December 29th

John 10 vv 1-10

The Good Shepherd is one of the most loved pictures of Christ we have. We love the twenty third psalm. My mother very much appreciated that my grandfather's sister (who was married to a pastor) read that psalm when her brother (my grandfather) died. So I read it for my mother, and my sister when their time came. We love the parable of the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety and nine on the mountainside and spares no effort to seek the lost. Maybe we think that it means us when we sing, *Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed, but yet in love he sought me; and on his shoulder gently laid, and home, rejoicing, brought me.* Quite right, it does mean us. And then this wonderful passage in John where Jesus reveals Himself to be the Good Shepherd. There were Old Testament prophecies that God Himself would become the shepherd of His people and that he would raise up a faithful shepherd of the house of his servant David. Jesus is of course both – Son of God and son of David – and fulfils all the prophecies about God nourishing and healing his people and keeping them safe for ever. One of the Sundays after Easter we keep as Good Shepherd Sunday and this chapter of course supplies the Gospel for that day, but why is it also that an extract from this chapter is provided for the Tuesday in Whitsun Week? The answer surely is the last verse: *I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly,* the gift of the Holy Spirit.

December 30th

Romans 12 vv 1-21

This is up there with I Corinthians XIII, Isaiah 55 and John 17 as one of my favourite chapters. Someone said that all the bible is infinitely valuable but some it is more infinitely valuable than some other parts. Romans 12 describes what it means to be a Christian. It describes the Church. To be a Christian is to be a member of the Church. We have to ask whether it really makes sense to be a non-practising member? Each Christian is someone for whom Christ sacrificed Himself. We therefore offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to Him. The BCP is more closely based on this verse – *a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee.* The Holy Spirit enables each of one of us to play his or her assigned role in the life and work of the Church, transforming us into the likeness of Christ. The Church is the body of all Christians, united in love, building one another up in the faith, doing God's work in the world, and, above all, worshipping Him in spirit and in truth.

December 31st

Romans 13 vv 8-14

Paul's great hymn to love in I Corinthians XIII follows his description of Christians as differently gifted, equally important members of the Body of Christ, the Church, in I Corinthians XII. Similarly and significantly, what Paul says about love in Romans XIII follows on from what he says about the Church, the Body of Christ, in Romans XII, only with a slight digression to teach us about how the Church has to live in the world until that great day when Christ shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

There is nothing I can say that would add to what Paul says in vv 8-10 and surely they need no explanation. The remainder of the chapter puts our lives in the context of eternity. We eagerly await the fulfilment of God's promises in Christ. We are citizens of heaven, not the children of the world. We walk in the spirit, not the flesh. We are not ordinary human beings. We are the Church of God. I don't go in much for new year's resolutions, but, if you do, you could do worse than to adopt the last verse of this chapter as how you intend to live this year and for ever.

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire.
Thou the anointing Spirit art, who dost thy seven-fold gifts impart.

Thy blessed Unction from above is comfort, life, and fire of love.
Enable with perpetual light the dulness of our blinded sight.

Anoint and cheer our soiled face with the abundance of thy grace.
Keep far our foes, give peace at home: Where thou art guide, no ill
can come.

Teach us to know the Father, Son, and thee, of both, to be but One.
That, through the ages all along, This may be our endless song:
Praise to thy eternal merit, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.