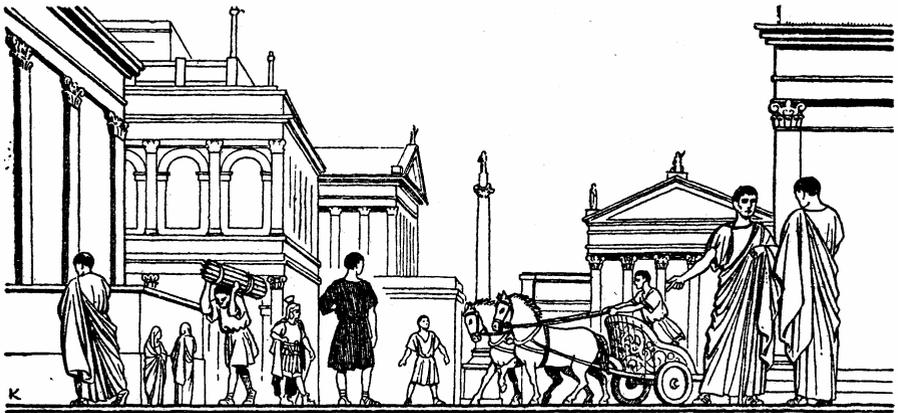


The Epistle to the Romans,



Street in a Roman City

Bible Notes October- December 2005

<http://hometown.aol.co.uk/rogerknight/myhomepage/newsletter.html>

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October 1st

Romans 1 v1

Romans is thought by some people to be the greatest of Paul's Epistles. In it, he explains how human beings can come to God. It is because God reaches out to us in love that we can know Him and worship Him and inherit eternal life. *Romans* made a tremendous impression on Martin Luther who, unable to find peace with God through his experience of being a monk in the Roman Church, discovered through St Paul the simple truth that God loved him just as he was. We are saved through faith, not works. God simply loves us. He does not love us because we are good people. He just loves us as we are. That is not to say that it does not matter whether we are good or bad. Christ had to die for our sins and our response to being set free from sin has to be to live a righteous life.

In living memory preachers like Martin Lloyd-Jones preached week after week to congregations of hundreds of people on the Epistle to the Romans. Where has that eagerness to hear God's Word gone?

October 2nd

Romans 1 v1

Paul sees himself as Christ's slave. Just as the Israelites were slaves to the Egyptians, unredeemed human beings are slaves to sin and death. A slave is set free by the payment of a ransom. Christ sets us free by offering His life as a ransom. We therefore owe Him for our freedom from guilt and its consequence, eternal death. Christ's gift of His life for us is freely offered, but that does not mean it should be despised. It is priceless, not valueless. We owe Him our lives and should live accordingly.

Paul is an apostle. An apostle is one who is sent. Christ is the first apostle, the One sent by God to bring in His Kingdom. The whole Church is apostolic. All Christians inherit Christ's mantle. We are all called to work for His Kingdom.

Paul is separated for the work. He was identified by the Holy Spirit and ordained by the laying on of hands with prayer and fasting. Some people are called to be separated and consecrated for particular forms of

ministry within the apostolic Church. We should pray for vocations to the ministry, pray for the task of discerning those who are truly called and pray for the training and preparation ordination candidates need to receive.

October 3rd

Romans 1 vv 1&2

The challenge for the early Christians was their relationship to the Jewish faith. Was Christianity a new religion? Was it a sect within Judaism? Was it a Jewish heresy? Jesus clearly regarded the books we call the Old Testament as Scripture. He identified Himself as the Son of the God Who spoke to Moses and the prophets. The apostles worshipped and preached both in the Jerusalem Temple and the synagogues of the diaspora. Yet, by and large, the Jews rejected Jesus and the message of the apostles. So was Christianity a new religion which rejected the Old Testament and Jewish ideas about God? Following Jesus, the early Church boldly answered that they were the true heirs of Moses and the prophets. The New Testament fulfilled what was now to be called the Old Testament. Christ fulfilled the Law and the prophets. The proclamation of the Gospel to all the nations¹ was always God's intention. Paul is not therefore being false to his Jewish heritage in becoming a Christian. He has not invented a new religion. It is not his idea to preach Yahweh, the LORD, God, to the whole world. All this is implicit, if not explicit, in what God has already revealed in the Old Testament.

October 4th

Romans 1 vv 3&4

The expectation was that God would send a Messiah – an anointed king, a descendant of the great King David. Jesus fulfilled all that and the Gospels are careful to tell us so. He fulfilled all that, but, slowly it dawned, that He was much more than that. He was the Son of God – a fact made clear by the witness of the Resurrection and the Holy Spirit, but perhaps only discernible by those who are open to spiritual things, opened by God maybe, as Paul was opened to God by his experience on the road to Damascus.

¹ The word gentiles more or less means nations.

October 5th

Romans 1 vv 5-7

Paul saw himself as the apostle to the nations (gentiles) and so he has been seen in the history of the Church. He was certainly not, however, the only missionary to the gentiles and he had not founded the Church in Rome. He had not even visited Rome when he wrote this letter. But the Church in Rome was (and is) part of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church. There are local churches throughout the world and every local Church is part of the Catholic Church. It is sad that we are divided into denominations and do not fully recognise one another's ministries, but all Christians are one in Christ – whether we like it or not. The Roman Christians were definitely saints – in the New Testament sense in which all Christians are called saints. In some sense (which may not have been clear either to them or to Paul) they came under Paul's apostolic authority. Church unity only means anything if we recognise that the Holy Spirit authentically works in all Christians and that the insights of others therefore have to be recognised as possible indicators of what the Spirit is saying to the churches. We weigh what they say against Scripture and look at it in the light of what we have received from God (our tradition) and prayerfully try to discern what is truly of God and what comes from human pride or error.

October 6th

Romans 1 v8

Rome was the capital of the empire. All roads led there. It seems that even some of Caesar's household were open to the faith. It was also a dangerous place for Christians and Jews and many of the early martyrs² died at Rome. The Roman Church therefore had a key role in witnessing Christ to the world.

What are our opportunities for witness? The fact that services take place in our churches, the ringing of the bells, these are acts of witness whether people come or not. Our attending personally is an act of witness to our friends and neighbours, especially if they see that worship is a priority for us and we are unwilling to miss Church in order to have a lie in or to do other things. We witness simply by being Christians at work or in the neighbourhood. We may sometimes have

² Remember martyr means witness

the chance to give a reason for the hope that is within us. We are short-changing people if we let these opportunities pass. There should be something about us that makes people want to know why we are Christians and we ought to be prepared to tell them. There is a danger that we can be so absorbed in church meetings etc that we never meet any non-Christians to bear witness to – unless of course our church events are so filled with laughter that everyone wants to come along and share them with us.

October 7th

Romans 1 v9

Translate this verse literally and Paul is saying *As God is my martyr*. That makes the point about the meaning of witness. Someone whose life truly bears witness to Christ is someone who is prepared to give up everything and offer his or her life in solidarity with the Saviour.

Paul has not been to Rome but he upholds the Roman Church by his prayers. The holy catholic Church is a fellowship, a communion³, united in prayer with Christ and in Christ. We sustain one another by our prayers. Daily prayer is a vital part of our lives as Christians: prayer for ourselves; prayer for our family; prayer for the Church, which is our family since we are brothers and sisters under the Fatherhood of God; prayer for the world which God so loved that He sent His Son. Pray for the conversion of people you know. Pray for the local church, the diocese and the church worldwide. Pray for missionary work at home and abroad. Pray for those with authority in the world. Pray for church leaders locally and at the diocesan, national and international level. Pray for Church unity. Pray for the poor, the sick and the dying. Pray for your enemies. But, whatever else you do, be constant in prayer.

October 8th

Romans 1 vv 10-12

Paul has not met the Roman Christians, but he is praying for the opportunity to visit them. He wants to bring them a spiritual gift, as must be the desire of any visiting preacher or pastor. He looks forward to being “comforted” together with them in their common faith. The

³ koinonia, κοινωνία

word “comfort⁴” has lots of senses in the New Testament – encouragement, exhortation, appeal, request, comfort, consolation. It possibly means all these things here, but, whatever it means, the point is that the Holy Spirit is the Comforter. We Christians are supposed to bless one another in the same way that the Holy Spirit blesses us. After all, we are His dwelling place.

Where Paul has already spoken of a spiritual gift, the word used is charisma⁵. This is the word from which we get “charismatic” and start thinking about people praying in tongues and singing with their arms in the air. Charisma is, however, simply a gift. In this context it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. All Christians are blessed by gifts of the Holy Spirit. So we are all charismatics really⁶.

October 9th

Romans 1 vv 13-16

Paul is anxious that the Roman Christians should not think he is reluctant to come to them. He has obligations to the Greeks – the people who thought themselves civilised – and the Barbarians – the people who were looked on as uncultured. He has a duty to the educated and to the unlearned. There is no room for snobbishness or discrimination in the Church. Sometimes the Church of England has been seen as a refuge for the middle classes and the respectable poor, a church more at home with dons than dockers. But it won't do. They're all welcome in Christ's Church on exactly the same terms – that they repent and believe. Paul also depends on the support of all these people to sustain his own ministry. V16 might suggest that Paul hadn't gone to Rome because he was afraid. In fact he had been just too busy. He would eventually go to Rome, but as a prisoner.

⁴ παρακλησις, paraklesis, from which we get the word Paraclete for the Holy Spirit.

⁵ χαρισμα

⁶ Just as we are all Catholics because all Christians are part of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and we are all evangelicals because we all believe in and proclaim the Gospel – the evangelium.

October 10th

Romans 1 vv 16&17

The Jews were the chosen people, chosen to be visited by the Messiah Who would open God's Kingdom to all nations. They were prepared by the Law and the Prophets. The Gospel then is to the Jew first, but then it is to the Greeks and all the nations. It is not by birth or by knowledge that one comes into the Kingdom of God. It is by faith and God's gift of faith is on offer to people of all races, both sexes and every social class.

October 11th

Romans 1 vv 18-20

We ought to know. We should understand. The wonders of the world bear witness to the existence and wonder of God. We all have a conscience. There is no real excuse for the cruelty and barbarity, the indifference to the sufferings of others, which disfigure so much of human history. God is not only powerful and generous in His Love, but, precisely because He is infinitely loving, He is angry at the idolatry, greed, exploitation, bloodshed, dishonesty, etc etc which He sees on earth.

October 12th

Romans 1 vv 21-23

Most pagan religions in those days had idols or images. Their worshippers apparently worshipped statues of animals or people or mythical beasts or they worshipped the sun and the moon and the stars. Instead of worshipping the Creator, they worshipped created things.

To worship is to offer your life to or for someone. In the old marriage service the man promised to worship his wife. The puritans disliked that as much as the feminists disliked her promising to obey him. Both words tend to be dropped in modern weddings. It is very daring to promise to worship your wife because you can only give total, unqualified worship to God. Anything else would be idolatry.

We know all this, but what do we live our lives for? What do we worship? Does God really come first? Or does He come after family, the need to earn a living, the desire to be rich or to get promoted, even behind our leisure activities? What priority does God have in our lives?

October 13th

Romans 1 vv 24-32

When we no longer regard God as Number One, everything else goes awry. If, instead of living for God, we live for ourselves, seeking satisfaction and gratification in wealth, power, sexual conquests and so forth, then greed, jealousy and lust can lead us to exploit others, to be dishonest or even violent, and to tread on others on our ascent to the top. Our world doesn't work if we don't obey the Maker's instructions (to love Him with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves). We quickly lose the brotherhood of man when we forget the fatherhood of God. We sin and the wages of sin is death.

October 14th

Romans 1 vv 26&27

I want to examine these verses separately because homosexuality is such a hot topic in the church and the world beyond at the moment. The Greeks in particular glorified homosexual relationships. In Rome there were all sorts of sexual perversions involving people of both sexes. All this would have appalled Paul, brought up a Jew, and taught from boyhood that such things were an abomination. Paul teaches here that the sexual perversion in the Greek and Roman world is a direct result of their rejection of the one true God. Some people would say that the rise of homosexuality in contemporary western culture likewise arises because, as a culture, we have left God behind.

I suppose there are three possible explanations for homosexual behaviour. Traditionally, it was thought to be a moral choice. People were free to decide for themselves whether or not to engage in certain practices. For most of the last two millennia in Christendom, it was believed to be wrong to have sexual relations with anyone other than your husband if you were a woman or your wife if you were a man. Homosexual behaviour was therefore a sin for which one would have to repent. For many years it was a crime punishable by Law. Most people over 40 were probably brought up to believe something like this. Apart from what the world religions teach, sex is obviously about the procreation of children and the reinforcing of the parents' love so that they stay together and bring up the offspring. Homosexuality is therefore seen by many people as "unnatural."

Compassionate people have also been aware, however, that some people seem to be very strongly attracted to people of the same sex. They do not seem to form sexual relationships very easily with the other sex. It seems cruel to punish them or to ostracise them or to pressurise them into marriages which may be unhappy for all concerned. If they have relations with consenting adults of the same sex, are they actually doing any harm? Might the command *Love your neighbour as yourself* lead us to leave these people alone or even to support them, so long as they don't hurt anyone else? Many people under 40 will have been brought up to believe something like this.

A few decades ago, it was believed that people became homosexual because of the way they were brought up. If they had therapy, they could be "cured". This view has gone out of favour and many people now believe that homosexuals are born that way. It is in their genes. They do not choose to be homosexual. There is no moral choice. They just are like that. Some Christians would say that God made them like that and that people who are by nature homosexual should have their unions affirmed and blessed by the Church. Such Christians would say that Paul is not condemning loving faithful homosexual relationships, but perverse exploitation of vulnerable people of either sex.

It is a deep subject. I cannot claim to be sure. Neither can the Anglican Church. The weight of Scripture and Tradition seems to require us to condemn homosexual practice, but modern insights and simple compassion make it very hard for us to condemn homosexuals. Hence the rather absurd contemporary teaching that it is all right to be a gay couple but not to enjoy gay sex. I think we need to pray for ourselves and our leaders that we can find answers which preserve moral values and do not make life impossible for people of particular opinions or inclinations.

October 15th

Romans 2 v1

This is worth meditating on. We are quick to condemn, but, if we are honest, we are all sinners in that we fail to love God and neighbour.

October 16th

Romans 2 vv 2-4

Paul had a strong sense of the justice of God. If God is a God of love He has to be angry with the wickedness done on earth. We are angry if we see our children hurting one another and we have the same dilemma as God. We have to stop one child hitting the other. Punishment might be the only right way to deal with the situation. Yet we cannot bear to punish our child – even a bad child. It is much more difficult for God. His children kill and maim, yet He loves them more than any earthly parent loves a child.

We are all sinners who deserve judgment and punishment. What right do we have to condemn others?

October 17th

Romans 2 vv 5-8

There is a judgment. This universe is ruled by a just judge. There is a reward for the righteous and there is punishment for the unrighteous. This used to be standard Christian teaching. We are now so anxious, however, to portray God as totally forgiving and to promise universal salvation that we take a dangerous shortcut to that point. We effectively say that it doesn't matter what people are like. God will let them off anything and we can all expect a home in Heaven. Sin doesn't matter. In fact the word seems to mean very little and to sound quaint and old-fashioned. Maybe this accounts for people's *take it or leave it* attitude to participation in public worship and the rest of the Christian life. In fact it is certainly true that *God does not desire the death of a sinner*, but we get to that point not by saying that sin does not matter, but that God goes to the extreme length of the Sacrifice of His Son to deal with it. If we know that we are forgiven, our proper response is not complacency, but to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves.

October 18th

Romans 2 vv 9-12

It is the same for all, Jew or Gentile. We are judged by what we do, not what we are. The danger for us Christians is that we think of ourselves as superior just as the Jews did in Paul's day. Our relationship with God depends on His grace to us, not our privileged status.

October 19th

Romans 2 vv 13-16

The Jews possessed God's Law in the Hebrew Bible. They read it and had it read to them. It is not, however, by owning a Bible that we are saved, nor even by reading it. It is by living according to the Word of God. If a person who does not even own a Bible shows kindness because that is what his God-given conscience teaches him to do, that is worth a lot more than some hypocrite who knows the Bible backwards but does not love God or neighbour very much.

One day God will judge everybody according to the Christian Gospel.
By their fruits you will know them.

October 20th

Romans 2 vv 17-23

If we read this simply as a condemnation of the Jews in Paul's day we come under the same condemnation ourselves. The whole point is that we must not judge others. We must examine ourselves. If we know what God wants from us, because we read the Bible and say our prayers and go to church, do we give it to Him or are we no better than the people outside?

October 21st

Romans 2 v24

There were times when the conduct of the chosen people was so bad that the gentiles, the nations, felt bound to reject the God of such a wicked race. There have certainly been times in Christian history when the conduct of Christians has brought shame on the Name of Christ – holy wars, inquisitions, exploitation of native peoples, slavery and so on. Again, it is easy to condemn people in the past and from other cultures, but what about us? Do people honour God because of what they know of us and our church? Do they respect us? Would they want to join us? Do they long to share our knowledge of God? Or do they say, *They're no better than us?* Do they think we're hypocrites? Do they think our faith means nothing because there are no fruits apparent in our lives as individuals or in our common life as a Christian community?

October 22nd

Romans 2 vv 25-29

The circumcision of the male Israelite was the physical sign that he belonged to the people of God. It was very precious to Jews, distinguishing them from gentiles and, of course, there was a great deal of discussion in the early Church as to whether gentile converts needed to be circumcised in order to become part of the people of God. St Paul was very firmly of the opinion that they should not be. What was required was faith. True faith would lead to true goodness. Without faith a man could not obey the Law of love. Without love he could not please God. In a faithless man, circumcision was a meaningless ritual, but a faithful man who was not circumcised would be accepted by God.

For Christians, this must raise the question of Baptism, our rite of initiation. As we shall see later, Baptism is a sacrament, a very precious gift of God which brings huge blessings to the baptised. It cannot be worth much, however, if its benefits are not received with faith and repentance for all our failure to obey God's Law of love. So, whether we were baptised as babies or adults, we must continue in faith to *walk worthy of our vocation* as Christians.

October 23rd

Romans 3 vv 1-4

Paul does not conclude that a religious upbringing is valueless! It is good to know the Law and the Prophets, the Gospel and the Epistle, the techniques involved in prayer, what happens in church, even if we only know these things in our heads and not in our hearts. This kind of upbringing prepares us to come to faith and provides us with the tools for a Christian life when we do. Paul himself used everything he had learnt as a faithful Pharisee when he became a Christian. So have your children baptised. Bring them to church and Sunday School. Teach them the bible stories. Encourage them to pray. And pray for them. It may not seem to be doing much good now, but who knows what will happen in the future when all this head knowledge bears fruit in knowing Jesus in the heart?

October 24th

Romans 3 vv 5-8

Paul's doctrine that we are saved apart from the Law always runs the risk of being misunderstood. Is he saying that ethics and morals don't matter? If God will forgive the person who says *I repent, I believe* even if he is really wicked, whereas a priest or a Pharisee or some religious person like that remains unaccepted by God, is it fair? If forgiving a really wicked person is the best demonstration of God's love, might it not be better if we were all really wicked? *Let us do evil, that good may come!* Paul is horrified by this travesty of his teaching. What he is saying is that not even the priest, the Pharisee or the religious person is good enough. Their danger comes from thinking that they are and that they do not need to repent. In fact we all need to repent. If we truly repent, we are bitterly sorry for our sins. We don't complacently carry on in them because we know God will always forgive us. He will, but we are too ashamed to keep letting down our loving, heavenly Father.

October 25th

Romans 3 vv 9-18

Paul wants to establish the fact that all human beings need God's mercy and that God's mercy is available to everyone. It is not a privilege for one particular race. It is open to all. And everyone needs it. We are all sinners and we all, without exception, need His mercy. Paul establishes this with a series of Old Testament quotations, mostly from psalms. He quite naturally establishes his points by appealing to Scripture, but there is more to it than that. Paul is demonstrating that the Gospel of Jesus Christ follows on quite naturally as the fulfilment of the Old Testament. Jesus did not start a new religion, contradicting Moses and the Prophets. Paul is not being false to his Jewish heritage. He is truer to the faith of Abraham, Moses, etc than his contemporaries who fail to see that Jesus is the promised Messiah and that God's Kingdom is open to all people of faith wherever they come from and whoever their ancestors are.

October 26th

Romans 3 vv19-21

The Bible is not a book for bashing those outside the community of faith. It is a standard by which we measure ourselves. Possessing God's Law doesn't save us. The Bible shows us where we are going wrong. So we have less excuse than those who do not have it!

October 27th

Romans 3 vv 22-26

The Law therefore condemns the Jew first and then the Gentile. It sets the standard. We ought to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. All the commandments are summarised in these two. None of us does, Jew or gentile. So we all stand condemned, but those of us who have the Law are condemned before those who do not. Calling yourself a Christian is no better than calling yourself a Jew. What you are is what matters, not what you call yourself, or even what other people think of you. What does God think of you? A true Jew, a true Christian is one who lives by God's Law of love. There was, therefore, only one true Jew or Christian.

The Good News is that God has dealt with our sinful self by the death of Jesus on the Cross. What is required is not self-justification on our part, but faith, faith in Jesus. We repent of our sins. We are forgiven. We are God's children. By His grace we now walk in His ways, not in order to earn our salvation, but because we are saved.

October 28th

Romans 3 vv 27-31

The clinching argument against thinking that salvation was only for the Jews is the fact that God made the whole human race. He made the man Adam from whom every race is descended. He is not the God only of the Jews. He is the God of all humanity. It must follow that all people, all of us made in God's image, can relate to Him in love and know Him Whom to know is eternal life. The point is not circumcision or uncircumcision. The point is to receive God's free gift of Jesus with faith.

October 29th

Romans 4 vv 1-5

Jewish people look back to Abraham with pride as their ancestor. He is effectively the founder of their people. So how did Abraham relate to God? Did he earn God's favour because he was a good man? Or did God freely give Abraham his favour to be received in faith? If Abraham earned God's favour, he got what he was owed. It wasn't a gift at all. But if God's favour was undeserved, unearned then it was God's free gift. Which was it?

October 30th

Romans 4 vv 6-8

Paul now quotes Psalm 32, referring to David another great hero of Israel. David celebrates because he is forgiven. He is unworthy of God's love, but God loves him anyway. Now wasn't this also the case with Abraham? Indeed, isn't it the case with everyone who is truly accepted by God? They know they haven't deserved God's favour. They simply rejoice to receive God's love in faith.

October 31st

Romans 4 vv 9-13

Circumcision is the deed which confirms that a man is part of the covenant community of Israel and bound to keep the Law. So did God come to Abraham to speak with him and bless him only after he was circumcised? Was Abraham circumcised, was he under the Law, when God called him and promised him that he and his descendants would live in the Promised Land and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed? No, God spoke to Abraham and made all these promises long before he was circumcised. God did not choose Abraham because he kept the Law. He just called him and Abraham accepted God's call in faith. So Abraham was accepted by God because he had faith, not because he was circumcised and kept the Law. Those, therefore, who share the faith of Abraham are his true family. Not those who are his blood relatives, not those who are circumcised and keep the Law, but all those who have faith in God are the true heirs of Abraham. So the Law itself (the Law being the first five books of the Bible) teaches that it is through faith that we are accepted by God and that therefore anyone who has faith can come to Him, whatever tribe they belong to, whatever sins they may have committed.

Abraham was circumcised after he came to faith. He obeyed God's commandment because he believed. We believe and therefore keep God's commandments. It is not the other way round!

November 1st

Romans 4 vv 14&15

We wouldn't need God's grace if we could earn our own salvation. So we wouldn't know the full extent of His love. The Law is not a stairway to Heaven. It is a measure of our worthiness and we all fail.

November 2nd

Romans 4 vv 16&17

We do not earn eternal life. It is God's free gift. I have always found it hard to understand what is actually meant by "grace". The root meaning, however, is that it is free. God freely gives the gift of life. We receive His gift in faith.

As God is the Creator of everything, He is the Creator of the whole human race. His gift of life is freely available to anyone who will receive it in faith. Abraham received God's gift in faith. Abraham's name means *father of many nations*. He is therefore the father of people of every race who receive God's gift in faith, not just of the Jews, who have come up under the Law.

November 3rd

Romans 4 vv 18-25

Abraham was asked to believe something pretty unlikely, that his descendants would inherit the Promised Land. He and Sarah had been unable to have children when they were young. Now they were far too old to have children anyway. But Abraham believed God and that was counted to him for righteousness. God can do anything and Abraham accepted that what God had promised He would do.

Paul says all this was not written down simply as an interesting story about people who lived 1,000 years before Paul's time. It is a story with significance for every generation. Those who believe God are justified. Much more important than a place to pitch your tent in the land of Canaan, if you believe in Jesus, your sins are forgiven, you are made right with God and will live in Him for ever.

November 4th

Romans 5 vv 1&2

This is difficult to understand. It needs to be savoured. We are not at peace with God if we are sinners, ie we do not love God and neighbour. We are at odds with God, our lives on earth are unsatisfactory and their end will be condemnation. However, Jesus makes us right with God if we repent and believe. We are forgiven by His grace. We only need faith. If we have faith, we are no longer at odds with God. We live fulfilled lives on earth and look forward to glory in Heaven.

November 5th

Romans 5 vv 3-5

Life is certainly not always easy. Sometimes it is easier if we are Christians. If we are habitually honest, people trust us. If we are kind, we may well find people are kind to us. If we don't drink to excess, we're healthier, better-liked and richer. I sometimes think a Christian has a good chance of winding up in the middle. We don't squander our health, money and opportunities so that we sink to the bottom, but we are probably not ruthless enough to hit the big time.

On the other hand, life is sometimes tougher for Christians. We may be laughed at, even persecuted. There is no guarantee that Christians won't get sick or go bankrupt. We might feel we are having to deny ourselves when we would quite like to get drunk or consort with another man's wife. Believing in a good God, we sometimes find it harder than unbelievers to explain why, say, good people die of cancer or tropical paradises are engulfed in tidal waves. We may even have a sense of shame if we feel that our faith is too weak to cope with life's crises.

Paul knows all this. He experiences plenty of hardship himself. He does find, however, that coming through those dark times actually strengthens our faith and enables us to know the fullness of God's love.

November 6th

Romans 5 vv 6-8

Not only does it not depend on us, how marvellous it is that God cares about us so much. This is the sense that we have to have, that God loved us so much when we did not love Him that Jesus died for us. Once we are saved, there can be no place for any half-heartedness in our love for Jesus. He has given us everything.

November 7th

Romans 5 vv 9&10

There is no reason to be afraid. If God has already done so much for us, how could we ever think that He might let us down and that we should not find a place waiting for us in Heaven?

November 8th

Romans 5 v11

*And not only so, but we also **JOY** in God.*

Joy is one of the distinguishing features of the Christian life. It has to be when God has done so much for us and given us so much. We know God now. We have such wonderful experiences and that is only a foretaste of the joy which shall be revealed.

I am so very concerned about the poor attendances at some of our services. This is partly because we cannot sustain a church in Cuxton and Halling if there is not the support. What really worries me, however, is that people feel they can stay away. Worship is the best thing we can do on earth and is in fact a foretaste of Heaven. Prayer alone, family prayers, bible study groups, yes they are all good, but what Jesus told us to do is to meet together and to *do this in remembrance of Him*. Personally I find it very hard to understand how Christians can miss their Sunday Communion unless there is an extremely good reason for them to do so. We don't always feel like it, but it is *our duty and our joy* and when we don't do our duty, we let down God, we let down other people and we let down ourselves. If we are not sustained by common worship, we become poorer Christians less able to cope with life and less able to be Christ's witnesses to the world.

November 9th

Romans 5 vv 11&12

The archetypal man is Adam. The word "Adam" means man. Adam is described as the son of God. But Adam sins. Adam rejects God. Adam cuts himself from the Source of life and therefore faces death. The point is that all human beings are sinners like Adam.

Jesus is also the archetypal man. He is the Son of God. But Jesus does not sin. He is obedient even to death on the Cross. Paradoxically, by His loving acceptance of death, He gains eternal life, eternal life for the whole human race. We all die therefore in Adam, but can all be made alive in Christ through faith.

November 10th

Romans 5 vv 13&14

Paul's point is that the Law, in the sense of what God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, came well after Adam. There were human beings around long before the Law. In fact there were plenty of human beings around in Paul's day who did not know the Jewish Law. With or without Torah, we all die because we all sin. As we read in chapter 1, we ought to know God and what is right from our wonder at the Universe and from the promptings of our conscience. Deep down inside we do know the principles of a life of love. Yet we all fail. We all sin and therefore we all die.

November 11th

Romans 5 vv 15-19

If the human race had not sinned, in theory⁷, we should be living the sort of life that Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden. That would have been pretty good, but not as good as the life we are promised in Heaven. God gave Adam a beautiful garden with all its plants and animals. He made Adam a living soul. He even gave him Eve. Life in Eden was good. But, because Adam sinned (as God knew He would), God was in a position to give humanity a far greater gift than anything in the whole of creation. God gave us Himself in Jesus and will transform us from being natural bodies into being spiritual bodies⁸. Through the experience of free will, sin and redemption we have something that we could never have received painlessly as a simple gift.

November 12th

Romans 5 vv 20&21

The Law reveals what sin is. What God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, the teaching Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount, these set a standard. They are a standard to attain and a measure of our attainment. Comparing ourselves with God's commandments we see just how sinful we are. We feel condemned. All the more reason, therefore, to rejoice in our redemption. The blessings of being restored to God far exceed the pain of the alienation we feel when we realise how far short we have fallen. We, therefore, rejoice.

⁷ It is in theory of course because it didn't work out that way.

⁸ See 1 Corinthians 15

November 13th

Romans 6 vv 1-4

All this might lead someone to say cynically, *the worse I am, the more opportunity for God to reveal His grace in forgiving me.* This is complete nonsense. No repentant sinner could want to fall back into sin. Jesus died so that we may live. We are in Christ and He is in us. So we die with Him and we rise with Him. This is the reality of Baptism. We are buried with Christ. We are risen with Him. The Adam life is over. Now we live the Christ life.

November 14th

Romans 6 vv 5-14

You can't sin when you are dead. Well you are dead. You have died with Christ in Baptism. You will rise with Him and live for ever in Heaven with Jesus. But it is not quite so simple as that. We are in an interim phase. We have been baptised. We are not yet in Heaven. We have God's Holy Spirit, His life-giving Spirit, but we also have bodies of flesh, that ordinary human nature which tends to rebel against God. We are between Adam and Christ. What we have to do is to continue destroying the earthy part of our nature, overcome the flesh with all its temptations, and live the risen life of Christ here and now. We have been baptised once and for all but we continue to repent of our lapses into sin, we continue to feed on Christ regularly in the Eucharist, we are guided by His word and upheld by our relationship with God in prayer. So we put to death all that is unworthy as we draw nearer to actually inheriting the inheritance we became entitled to when we were baptised.

November 15th

Romans 6 vv 15-23

What does it mean to be free? A child might answer that freedom is being able to just whatever takes your fancy. As we grow up, we realise that isn't freedom. It is selfishness which hurts you and other people. We are not free if we are controlled by our fancies. In fact people can be destroyed by their greed or lust or violent temper. All this selfishness is sin and sin leads to death and destruction. Christ has set us free from slavery to sin. This makes us His slaves, but His service turns about to be perfect freedom, a freedom which comes to its consummation in Heaven.

November 16th

Romans 7 vv 1-4

This is much simpler than it looks! Everybody knows that the Law says that marriage is for life. So if you go with someone else while your husband or wife is still alive you are an adulterer. Death, however, ends a marriage and a widow or widower is free to marry again. In Christ we die. We are dead to the Law because the Law relates to the demands of the flesh⁹, that basic human nature, which dies with Christ on the Cross. We are therefore widows or widowers no longer married to the Law and we are free to marry Christ. This is a much happier marriage prospect. We are no longer trying to win the approval of a judgmental spouse. We are basking in the joy of His unconditional love.

November 17th

Romans 7 vv 5&6

The letter of the Law. There are occasions when Jesus says that people are anxious to observe the letter of the Law but missing the point of what it means. Look, for example, at His teaching on the Sabbath. He says the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. I think this is what we often mean by the spirit and the letter of the Law. A person can insist that he is within the Law if he drives at 30 mph down Bush Road, but at certain times of day he is a dangerous menace if he does so. At other times of day, it is quite safe to drive at 45 mph on Rochester Road (where the speed limit is 40) and we might feel unfairly treated if some officious policemen gave us a ticket.

I think Paul means more here, however, than interpreting the law sensibly in the light of what the Lawgiver intended. For Paul, the letter is quite literally the written Law – ten commandments on two tablets of stone and a lot more on parchment or paper. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit. Yet the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God and God is love and love is the fulfilment of the Law. The letter kills because it judges. The Spirit gives life because He brings forgiveness.

⁹ sarx, σαρκί

November 18th

Romans 7 vv 7-14

The Law is not evil. It teaches us how God wants us to live our lives. It is also good in that it makes us see our need for Christ and His forgiveness. The Law has a bad effect if it makes people think they can please God by their own efforts. Either they get too cocky and effectively reject God because they think they don't need Him, perhaps despising other people because they are not so good at keeping the Law as they are¹⁰, or they get into a state of despair because they realise they are never going to make it. This latter seems to have been Paul's experience (and Martin Luther's). They were conscious of the incredibly high standard God sets us and only too conscious that they did not measure up. For both of them and us, it is a huge liberation, to know that we do not have to measure up to anything. God loves us the way we are. We only have to repent and believe.

November 19th

Romans 7 vv 15-25

It is great fun to read this out loud. Don't fail to volunteer if you see it's coming up to be read in church. It's confusing at first sight and the commentators differ as to whether Paul is speaking about before or after his conversion. I am pretty sure that he is speaking about his experience as a Christian. We are torn between Adam and Christ, between the flesh and the spirit. We long to live the risen life of Christ. We want to be good, but we know that we aren't. We make all sorts of resolutions. We repent of our sins. We so much want to please God. And we let Him down. We let ourselves down. We let the Church down. It is very easy either to despair, in which case we give up entirely or else live lives consumed by guilt, or to become complacent and accept the fact that, while we're not notably good, we're not notably bad either, certainly no worse than a lot of other people we could name. We don't have to do either of these things. We are liberated, free from the need to justify ourselves before God, to impress the neighbours, even to look good in our own eyes. We are free from all that. Let go and let God. Don't strive so hard to keep the Law. Live in the Spirit and you'll find you are keeping it anyway.

¹⁰ The Pharisee and the tax-collector.

November 20th

Romans 8 vv 1-4

The purpose of the Law was to make people good. It obviously failed because people can know the Law very well and still be bad. The Law does not set us free from the desire to sin. In fact, it can suggest whole new ways of sinning. Christ sets us free from sin and His Spirit gradually sets us free from the desire to sin as we resist temptation and receive God's grace in our lives.

November 21st

Romans 8 vv 5-8

The flesh is ordinary human nature. There are two ways of living. We can live after the flesh. That would mean that we are no better than anybody else. We can live after the Spirit. That would mean that we live like Christ. You and I are somewhere between those two, but, if we are Christians, we are definitely on the Spirit side and we ought to be growing more spiritual, not complacently living worldly lives with a bit of spiritual topping every now and again.

November 22nd

Romans 8 vv 9-14

As Christians, we are people of the Spirit. We are the children of God. God's Spirit is giving us eternal life. All our obligations are to God, not to the world. It follows that our Christian duty far outweighs our worldly commitments. If we live worldly lives, our spiritual nature slowly dies, we are drifting towards eternal death. If the Spirit of God lives in us, let Him live. Don't sink into ordinary worldliness. Live. Live a Christian life of love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance¹¹.

November 23rd

Romans 8 v15

One way of looking at redemption is that Christ bought us back from slavery to sin and death. We are therefore His slaves. Being a slave of Jesus wouldn't be a problem. He does, however, give us much more. We are not household slaves in His household. We are God's children in His household. We are not afraid of God as a master who can do anything he likes to us. We are His children and we call Him Father – and that's pretty amazing when you think just Who God is.

¹¹ Galatians 5 vv 22&23

November 24th

Romans 8 vv 16-18

In the creation story, God formed Adam of the dust of the earth. He then breathed into him the breath of life and the man became a living soul. There is a resonance between our spirit and God's Spirit. God's Spirit prompts our conscience, inspires our prayers and enables us to recognise that God is our Father. As brothers and sisters of Jesus, we are also co-heirs with Him. We have, with Him, an inheritance in Heaven. It is also true, however, that as He humbled Himself and suffered on the Cross, we may, with Him, have to accept humiliation and suffering. We know, when this happens, however, that we are on the road to glory with Him too.

November 25th

Romans 8 vv 19-23

The whole creation is in solidarity together. We all await new heavens and a new earth. All this will pass away. And what takes its place is so wonderful that the whole Universe is longing for it.

November 26th

Romans 8 vv 24&25

Faith, hope and love are the three virtues at the end of Paul's great hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13. We think we know what love and faith mean, but hope is more difficult. Maybe these verses help to explain. When we say, *I hope so*, we very often mean that we are not at all certain that it is so, maybe even that we think it is unlikely even though we wish it were true. In the New Testament, hope is much more positive than this. It is *the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life*. We don't yet know what it is like beyond the grave, but we can do a lot better than wish it will be nice. We have the Christian hope and Christian hope is closely akin to Christian faith. It is based on our own experience of Jesus in our daily lives. It is based on the shared experience of the Christian Church. It is based on the witness of Scripture. It is woven into the very fabric of the universe. Christian hope is not the same thing as knowledge. We shall not know fully until we get there. But it is a *sure and certain hope*.

November 27th

Romans 8 vv 26&27

We have seen how God's Spirit resonates with our spirit and persuades us that God is our Father. In the same way God's Spirit prays with us and for us. There are times when we feel we can't pray, times when we don't know what to pray for, but God's Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our needs better than we do. The Holy Trinity is a virtuous circle of love in which the Spirit, the Son and the Father share. As we are baptised into the Body of the Son, as we are the dwelling place of the Spirit, we are included in that virtuous circle. Our prayers, our needs are caught up, brought to the throne of grace and transformed by His all-conquering love. We do not have to be afraid.

November 28th

Romans 8 v28

The problem with this verse is when it gets misinterpreted. God does not promise here that Christians will never get sick, that their businesses will prosper and that their children will all make happy marriages. It shouldn't be necessary to say this, but purveyors of the so-called prosperity Gospel have done just this. They have promised all this and more if people will only become Christians (and send their contributions). God does love us very much and He looks after us. However, He promises to be with us and to comfort us in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, not that we shall never have to pass that way.

November 29th

Romans 8 vv 29&30

If we are Christians, it is all the work of God. God wanted us to be Christians. He chose us and called us. It is not because of our merits or perceptiveness. We are Christ's people because God has made us so. The two consequences of this are first that we can be confident that having picked us up He won't drop us. We are safe. Secondly it is up to us to take full advantage of what God has done for us and really live according to the Spirit. What it does not mean is that we should speculate about other people's status before God. That is for Him and them to sort out.

November 30th

Romans 8 vv 31-34

Absolutely no reason to be afraid. We do not have to fear the world because He has overcome the world. We do not have to fear Him because it is He Who has redeemed us. If He loves us to the point that Jesus dies for us, how can we doubt that He will love us whatever happens? If anything bothers us, how can we forget that Jesus Himself is praying for us in Heaven? We have a *sure and certain hope*.

December 1st

Romans 8 vv 35-39

I can do no more than invite you to meditate on Paul's sublime words here. We really should feel that we can rest secure in the love of Jesus.

December 2nd

Romans 9 vv 1-5

If only every Christian had felt like S Paul. For centuries Jews have been persecuted by Christians. Jews were accused of the crime of deicide, killing God¹². Gentile Christians have felt justified in forcing the Jews into ghettos and subjecting them to all sorts of ill treatment. Yet how different is the attitude of the Apostle to the Gentiles. God had given Israel all the blessings of the Old Testament. Christ had been born a Jew. How Paul longed for a reconciliation where Jew and gentile would be united in the Church of Jesus Christ. Instead of that Christian maltreatment of Jews has made it very hard for Jews to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. Thank God that things now seem to be a lot better and pray for those institutions and leaders who seek to promote understanding between faiths and pray for an end to anti-Semitism and all kinds of persecution of anyone by anyone.

December 3rd

Romans 9 vv 6-9

Abraham believed God when He promised him and Sarah a son. This lad would be the child of the promise. Unfortunately, Abraham and Sarah's faith wavered and they agreed that Abraham should father a child with Sarah's maidservant Hagar. This boy was Ishmael, the child of the flesh. When Sarah eventually bore the child of the promise, Isaac, the

¹² like homicide is killing a man or fratricide is killing your brother or suicide is killing yourself.

two women quarrelled and Hagar and her son were driven out. Paul takes this as an allegory. Not all Abraham's descendants are chosen, only the children of the promise. The Jews who believe that they are God's people simply because they are Abraham's blood descendants and recipients of Torah¹³ are now the children of the flesh. Those Jews and gentiles who accept by faith what God promises in Jesus are the children of the promise.

December 4th

Romans 9 vv 10-13

Isaac, the son of the promise, married Rebecca and she bore twin boys Esau and Jacob. It was Jacob who would be renamed Israel and become the eponymous father of the chosen people. Paul makes the point that we receive God's promises simply because God gives them to us, not because we deserve them. We do not earn our salvation. The awkward consequence of this is that it really does not seem fair. If God does not favour the good or at least those who are trying to be good, where is the justice in the Universe? Paul boldly takes his argument to its logical conclusion. God made his choice between Esau and Jacob even before the boys were born. So it did not depend on their merits. Indeed, personally, I think Esau was a much nicer person than Jacob, but God chose Jacob. Paul has thus dealt with the awkward question as to why the Israelites in general and the Pharisees in particular do not have favoured status, but he has raised another serious question which may trouble some of us very much. What if God isn't fair?

December 5th

Romans 9 vv 14-16

God forbid that there should be unrighteousness with God. Our whole belief system is based on the notion that there is Justice undergirding the universe. We do not believe that our world was created by an infinite but indifferent Creator. He is not some cosmic engineer who has invented a mechanism of which we are a part and for whom He no more cares than I cared about the nuts and bolts in my Meccano set. He is infinite, but He is also love. He cares about each one of us. He gives us Law to protect us. We expect the innocent to be vindicated and the just to be punished. Indeed our human laws are based on this notion of

¹³ Law

Justice as something that exists in its own right. We do not believe that law ought to be used to enforce the arbitrary will of the powerful. We do not even believe that the will of the majority should always prevail. We believe that the lynch mob is wrong and that the accused is entitled to a fair trial before an impartial court. Behind this recognition of Justice as something which exists in its own right, independent of what human beings may believe or do, is the conviction that God is just¹⁴.

December 6th

Romans 9 vv 17&18

Paul now takes another story from the Torah – the story of Pharaoh. The Bible quite clearly states that God raised up Pharaoh and hardened his heart so that he refused to let the Israelites go until God had sent the ten plagues on Egypt. This seems extraordinary at first sight. If God could control Pharaoh's mind, why didn't he fill Pharaoh with compassion for the slaves and make him let them go before all that suffering was inflicted on the Egyptians? If God is in control of the world and what people do, why is there any pain or suffering at all? That is the awful question that arises if we believe that God determines everything.

But consider the alternative. Suppose God were not in control. Then what? Maybe the Israelites would never have got free no matter how many plagues were sent. Maybe Mary wouldn't have agreed to be the Mother of Jesus. Maybe Judas wouldn't have betrayed Him. Maybe the Devil will ultimately win and there never will be a Kingdom of God. Maybe our prayers make no difference because God can't or won't change what happens to us or what other people do us. The consequences of believing that God does not determine everything are as dreadful as the consequences of believing that He does.

¹⁴ Plato and other philosophers have maintained that Justice is something (a form in Plato) which exists independently of God. Indeed some people would argue that we can only say that God is just because we have a concept of Justice apart from God. Plato lived in a city where the gods were human writ large. We believe in a God Who is the infinite Creator of everything there is. It is hard to see where justice comes from if it is not inherent in God, but, even if it were, it would obviously be a disaster for faith and ethics if the Power behind the Universe were unjust.

December 7th

Romans 9 vv 19-24

Paul is really saying here that we have got beyond the limits of what we are capable of understanding. We have to say that we are free to choose, but that God is in control. We have to say that He is just, but we cannot restrict His freedom of action. He must be just and He must be merciful. If these seem to us to be oppositions or even contradictions that must be because we are thinking about things that are beyond human understanding.

In the same way the Church would later conclude that we must say *The Father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods but one God... and our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man... Who although he be God and Man: yet he is not two but one Christ*¹⁵. Certain things about God must be true and if we find them incomprehensible and apparently contradictory, that is because our human understanding is so limited.

The cleverest human philosophy does not have words to explain God, but the simplest of us can see the Word made flesh hanging on the Cross and it is there that these paradoxes are resolved.

December 8th

Romans 9 vv 25-33

Paul now turns to the Old Testament prophets to demonstrate for the Jews from their own Scriptures that it was always God plan to include the gentiles within His covenant people and that it was foreseen that the Jews would *en masse* reject His Word. They would try to justify themselves rather than accepting Christ's justification.

Many studies of Romans finish at the end of Chapter 8. The mental labour of the last week might suggest the reason for this!

¹⁵ From the Athanasian Creed which you find in the Book of Common Prayer immediately after Evensong under the heading Quicumque Vult.

December 9th

Romans 10 vv 1-8

For all this, Paul still maintains his longing that Israel should be saved. Where they have gone wrong is to trust in their own ability to keep an external law. But it isn't necessary to strive to be good. Christ washes our sins away in Baptism. We are clean in Him. Obeying the Law is not a matter of studying every letter of dusty scrolls, arguing over every nuance and forcing yourself to obey every precept that can be extracted or inferred from what is written.

He died that we might be forgiven, He died to make us good.

As believers in Jesus, our sins are washed away. We have the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Love and love is the fulfilling of the Law. To fulfil the Law is now inside us, our God-given love and our God-given conscience. Paul quotes Deuteronomy, the Law itself, to prove that this is what God always intended. Certainly we check what we believe the Spirit is telling us personally against what God has already revealed in Scripture and in the teaching of the Church as well as in conversation with other Christians. It would be incredibly arrogant not to. Nevertheless our basic motivation for being good is inside us, the love we have for God and neighbour, not the desire to justify ourselves in God's sight or anybody else's.

December 10th

Romans 10 vv 9&10

These two verses are something of a crux for evangelicals. If we are to be saved, we not only have to believe, but also to say that we are Christians. I think they may be overstating the case, but it is certainly true that, if we are Christians, we cannot be ashamed of Jesus and effectively deny Him if only by our silence. Neither can we escape our part of the apostolic mission to be witnesses for Jesus to the whole world. So come out of the closet. Let people know you are a Christian. Let them know you pray and read the Bible and come to Church on Sundays in preference to doing anything else and, when they ask you why, be prepared to tell them. It is your experience of the love of Jesus and you surely want to share it with other people.

December 11th

Romans 10 vv 11-13

No feelings of inferiority, then. It doesn't matter whether you are a Jew or a gentile, rich or poor, smart or stupid, old or young, beautiful or ugly. Whoever calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved. The Lord richly blesses everyone who calls on Him. You and I worship the same God as the Queen and as the Christians in Africa and America and India. He is the same God and we all come to Him through faith in Jesus Christ and that alone.

December 12th

Romans 10 vv 14&15

Anyone may call on the Name of the Lord and be saved, but they do have to hear that Name. We may pray for God to call missionaries and evangelists to proclaim the Gospel in this country and overseas, but we also have to play our part. Tell our friends. Tell our families. Tell our children. If we don't feel able to tell them ourselves, encourage them come to Church or Bible study, to take a course in Christian basics, a Confirmation course¹⁶. Get them to go to Sunday School. I always say the best witness to our faith is the people we are and the second best is what we do, but there is also a need at some stage to explain to people the reason for the hope that is in us. It may seem embarrassing. It may seem tough. We may be afraid of being laughed at or knocked back, though it is surprising how open some people are to hearing about Jesus and how many non-believers respect people of faith. Anyway, difficult or easy, the one who brings good news is beautiful (well his feet are).

December 13th

Romans 10 vv 16-21

Not everyone believes. Perhaps a majority reject the Gospel. That is their choice. They have the witness of the cosmos, the Book of Nature. Missionaries and evangelists do proclaim the Gospel in many nations. Bibles are widely available. There are Christian communities in many places. It is up to the world how it responds to all this witness and it will take the consequences of its choice.

¹⁶ I always run confirmation classes as a course in Christian basics in which people can explore whether they want to commit to Christ. There is no obligation to be confirmed at the end (though very few are not!).

December 14th

Romans 11 vv 1-6

There was a time when the prophet Elijah thought he was the only one left in Israel faithful to God. There are times when we feel that we are a very small minority as Christians in a secular society. We think that church congregations are aging and dwindling and we wonder what will happen when we are dead or too feeble to carry on. God replied that He had reserved to himself 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Two lessons: the situation was not as bad as Elijah thought; it was all in God's Hands. There may well be more faith in the community than we think. I believe that something like 70% British people identify themselves as Christians. We just have to get them to take their faith seriously! There are also churches in this country which are growing rapidly. God is in control of the situation. Our task is to remain faithful and, like Elijah and Peter, to do what God is telling us to do, rather than worrying about what other people are doing.

Paul points out that this faithful remnant are saved by grace, not works. It depends on God, not on us. We only have to be faithful.

December 15th

Romans 11 vv 7-15

The idea that those who are saved are saved by God's grace has raised the awful prospect that some people may not be saved because God does not give them grace. Put as starkly as that, it all sounds very arbitrary. We are at the limits of our understanding, remember. Paul is now softening this starkness. Maybe we can imagine reasons why God is acting like this. Maybe the rejection of Christ by the Jews was necessary to open the Kingdom of Heaven to gentiles. Maybe the coming of the gentiles into the Kingdom will persuade the Jews that Jesus is the Christ, their Messiah as well as the Messiah of the nations. Things have happened the way they have because God has so determined them, but maybe the very way things have happened has opened the way for people to use their free will to make the right choices.

December 16th

Romans 11 v16

This verse probably needs its own explanation. At the beginning of the Harvest, traditionally the Jews brought the firstfruits as an offering to God¹⁷. This was considered to consecrate the entire crop. It could then be enjoyed by the entire community as a blessing from God and there was a responsibility to share it with the poor. Consecrating a representative part of something effectively consecrates the whole. The presence of the Temple made Jerusalem the Holy City. Keeping the Sabbath holy, consecrates the entire week to God. Paul uses this to illustrate what has happened with the proclamation of the Gospel to the nations. Israel was the firstfruit, the nation called to be a holy nation, a royal priesthood. Through this consecration of Israel (the giving of the Law, the coming of Christ) the Gospel has now been proclaimed to all the nations and all the faithful, Jew and gentile, now constitute the holy nation and royal priesthood.

December 17th

Romans 11 vv 17-24

We all know about grafting. The stock is the stem with the root in the ground. It is possible to graft new branches onto the stock, possibly different varieties of the same fruit. Fruit growers have found that they get better crops by this process. Stretching Paul's analogy slightly, you can imagine Abraham as the stock, planted in the ground. The Jews are the natural branches, growing from the stock, nourished by its sap. Because many of them have proved unfruitful, they have been cut out and replaced by other branches. The faithless Jews have been cut out and replaced by faithful gentiles. Some gentiles might boast about this and mock the Jews now piled up outside the orchard apparently ready for burning. Paul, however, warns them not to be like this. If they are so unfruitful as to gloat over the misfortune of others, they may find themselves cut off, and, if the unfaithful Jews reconsider and repent, God will gladly graft them back onto the stock where they belong.

¹⁷ There used to be a similar festival in England on 1st August, Lammas Day, when the first of the season's bread was offered in the Loaf Mass. This is why August Bank Holiday Monday used to be the first Monday of the month, as it still is in Scotland.

December 18th

Romans 11 vv 25-36

Paul develops the theme that all this has happened so that ultimately Jews and gentiles will be saved. This is how it will all work out under the providence of God. At the time, non-believing Jews and Christians found themselves to be enemies. In Paul's day Jews persecuted Christians. Later it would be the other way round. But it ought not to be so. We are all God's people. Christians are richly blessed by their inheritance of the Jewish Scriptures and by Jesus the Jew and by all His Jewish apostles and disciples. Jews would find the fulfilment of their Law in Christ. Christians and Jews should not be at enmity. We should learn from one another and look forward to a common salvation.

December 19th

Romans 12 vv 1&2

I'm always quoting Romans 12 v2 in the Authorised Version which I think puts this so well. *Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.* That to me is the essence of what it is to be a Christian. We are not to live ordinary, worldly lives indistinguishable from the lives of those who are not Christians. We are to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. The renewing of our mind is the work of the Holy Spirit. The transformation is transformation into the similitude of Christ. The Greek word Paul uses for transformation is metamorphosis¹⁸. This is the word we use for a tadpole turning into a frog or a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. Now, it's probably OK being a tadpole or a caterpillar, but it is not your destiny. It is not what you hatched out of the egg to be. So hop up out of the water and breathe the fresh air, grow some wings and fly up into the sky. Don't be conformed: be transformed. You're a Christian. So live in the power of the resurrection.

Incidentally v1 is the thought behind the words we say in the prayer after Communion in the old Prayer Book service: *And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee.* An appropriate response to being reminded of Christ's Death for us in the Sacrament and participating in His Risen Body.

¹⁸ μεταμορφωσις

December 20th

Romans 12 vv 3-8

All Christians are part of the Body of Christ and we are all different because that He is how He wants us to be. We have different talents and different opportunities. These give each one of us a unique opportunity to work for the Kingdom of God. I conducted a wedding today and the church was full. This was so uplifting for all concerned. Even if you only make up the numbers you are doing good! But everyone of us does more than simply make up the numbers. You may be able to spend a lot of time in prayer. Perhaps you can speak to someone in a unique way that really helps them. Maybe you're the one who can get a neighbour's shopping or do his garden. Perhaps you are so richly blessed financially that you can give a lot of money to the Church, to missions or charities. Maybe you're the practical person who can do some necessary job, the singer, the musician, the bell-ringer, the potential priest. We all have our bit to do and the Church will be that much the poorer if we don't do it. We must never despise other people or ourselves. Neither must we accord too much importance to ourselves or to other people. We are all humbled under God and He exalts all the humble.

December 21st

Romans 12 vv 9&10

This is Paul's description of what life ought to be like in a Christian community, a Church. If it isn't, it's because we are still conformed to the ways of this world. We gossip. We strive for pre-eminence. We judge other people. We feel insecure ourselves. Worldly matters have too high a place on our agendas. We have the wrong priorities. We need to be transformed. Hop out of the pond and realise that there is a more exciting, more stimulating world beyond. Get up off those nettle leaves and see the rest of the garden. Find out what the nectar in the Buddleia tastes like. Metamorphose into the likeness of Christ – something you can only do by the grace of His Holy Spirit.

It would be only too easy to make a list in our minds of the people holding back our Christian community. It would be much better to start by asking God to transform ourselves. That is where the metamorphosis of our Church has to begin.

December 22nd

Romans 12 vv 11-21

I can't add to Paul's words here. What they need is not some clever commentary. It is pretty obvious what he means. We need to be the sort of people he is describing. Ponder these words. Note how you fall short. Ask God to forgive you. Ask for the grace of the Holy Spirit to make you more of the butterfly God wants you to be and less of the caterpillar which perhaps you are. I keep thinking "chrysalis." Tadpoles turn directly into frogs, but caterpillars go through a chrysalis phase. They look dead from the outside, but inside they are dramatically changing. Maybe me you can make the changes that need to be made in your life by the tadpole method. Grow hind legs and front legs. Lose your tail. Develop a new body shape. Hop out of the pond and grow. In other words, change day by day as you go about your ordinary Christian life. But maybe you need to go into a chrysalis. Go on retreat or a quiet day. Take part in a confirmation course or an alpha course or something. Maybe just spend some time on your own with God. You may need a time or times when outwardly things are quiescent and unchanging but internally you are developing the spiritual organs that will enable you to fly and feast on nectar rather than nettle leaves. Such quiet times would probably be of benefit to us all.

December 23rd

Romans 13 vv 1-7

Christians were accused of being those who turned the world upside down. In many ways the Gospel does. Jesus teaches us not to seek wealth and power but to take up our cross and follow Him. The Church has often found itself at odds with the civil power when it has refused to worship false gods, when it has insisted on the rights of the poor, when it has opposed evils like Nazism or apartheid. And yet we do not seek revolution or rebellion. God has ordained authority structures in human society to enforce justice, to protect the weak, to guarantee essential freedoms. These civil powers are entitled to the prayer and other support of the Church. We speak out against corruption in high places and we uphold the right of governors to govern. It is much harder than being unquestioningly obedient or one of nature's rebels, but it is our vocation.

December 24th

Romans 13 vv 8-10

Today puzzles me. It is Christmas Eve and the Church will be packed with people celebrating the Birth of Jesus. I do not doubt for a moment that most are sincere. The Birth of Jesus really is something to celebrate.

So why will there be only a few people in Church Christmas Day? Why will there be fewer still on the Sundays after Christmas? Why is it that we shall not see the Church full again till next Christmas, unless we have the funeral of a popular person?

I am sure it is because we do not realise the implications of what we are celebrating at this time of year. If God loves us so much that He is born as one of us, dies on the Cross for our salvation, rises again and ascends to His Father's side, opening the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers, sending His Holy Spirit to be our Comforter on earth, if we really believe that God loves us that much we can only love Him with our whole hearts and our neighbours as ourselves, we can only offer Him our whole lives our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice. That means sharing regularly and frequently in common worship and living all the time the way that Paul describes here.

December 25th

Romans 13 vv 11-14

This is the day we celebrate what Christians hold uniquely. God loves us so much that His Son becomes one of us. He puts on our flesh so that we may put on Christ. He is made man so that we may become divine. He accepts our mortality so that we may become immortal. He shares our pain so that we may have joy in all its fullness. He shares our death to bring us life eternal. He experiences the full horror of temptation in order that we may be forgiven. He comes down from Heaven to lead us up to Heaven. He leaves His Father's side in order to bring us back to God. This is the Good News of Christmas. The Word is made flesh and dwells among us.

Almighty God you have give un your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin: grant

that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

December 26th

Romans 14 vv 1-16

If you've been eating turkey it was probably strangled and that wasn't allowed in the New Testament Church. The Old Testament prescribed a whole lot of rituals and prohibitions which kept the Jews distinct from the pagan tribes around them. In many ways these no doubt helped to keep the Israelites pure and focused on God. They could also lead to obsessiveness and self-righteousness. The early Church had to decide which of these rituals and prohibitions to adopt. In time Christians would develop their own distinctive customs – keeping Sunday as a Holy Day, avoiding meat on Fridays. Later some Christians would eschew alcohol and all forms of gambling. You can see the use of these customs and you can see the possible problems if they become obsessions, loading some people with guilt and leading others to feelings of superiority. Obviously there were differences of opinion in the Roman Church about what could be eaten and what ought to be done about observing certain days as special. No doubt both sides could give good reasons for their opinions. Paul's point, however, is that none of this matters as much as Christian unity in love. Don't scandalise people by making light of what they regard as sacred. Don't contend so hard for your position that you forget to love your adversaries. Christ died for your Christian brother. Don't lose him from the Church because of an argument. It is God Who will judge him, not you or I, as God will judge us and it would be a terrible thing to have on our conscience if someone were lost because of us.

What happens when a decision has to be taken about what course of action to take and people can't or won't agree? A Church in this position is in a very sorry state. I can only suggest the prayerful study of Scripture and an acceptance of the authority structures the Church has provided. But even if the differences lead to splits and departures, there must still be love.

December 27th

Romans 14 vv 17-23

I think Paul is rather impatient with these controversies. They are side issues, minor points, distracting from the Gospel itself. The Roman Church is a spirit-filled community. Roman Jews and pagans should be able to see the Church as a beacon. They should see how the Christians love one another and recognise the love of Christ in the Christian community. Instead of that, Christians are falling out among themselves about whether they may eat meat (which if bought in the market had very probably already been offered as a pagan sacrifice) or drink wine or observe Jewish feast days. None of these is the point if we are justified by faith. God isn't going to be worried if we do these things or if we don't do them and quarrelling about them is weakening the Church and discrediting us in the eyes of outsiders. It is all very frustrating for a dynamic leader like Paul with an impatience to share the Good News of Jesus with the whole world. What Paul says is, Keep these issues in proportion and do not offend the conscience of those who disagree with you. Considering that the main issue is God's gift of salvation to all who believe in Jesus, these other issues are pretty small in proportion.

December 28th

Romans 15 vv 1-14

The Roman Church seems to be a mixed bunch of gentile and Jewish believers. No doubt the Jewish Christians still had their contacts with the synagogue. There was plenty of scope for faction, petty politics, scandal. Paul appeals to the Roman Christians not to let these devices of the Devil spoil their unity, weaken their faith and disable their witness. He refers to Scripture as our guide in what we believe and what we do. He reminds us that different people have different ministries. He even points out that Jesus ministered to Jews, whereas he Paul ministered to gentiles. The Church needs all these different people with their diverse opinions and gifts and ministries. We need one another to build one another up into the full stature of Christ. We need one another if our Church is to complete the work Christ has given us to do. We must unite in the essentials and utilise our diversity to glorify God and build up His Church.

December 29th

Romans 15 vv 15-33

Paul explains himself. He has not been to Rome because he has been trying to preach the Gospel in places where it is not yet known. He does, however, write to the Roman Church with the authority of the apostle of the gentiles even though he did not found that Church. He asks for their prayers. The Church is one whether Jewish or gentile, by whomsoever it was founded. We support other Christians by our prayers (and in other ways) whatever denominations they belong to wherever they are in the world. As he writes Romans, Paul is on the way to Jerusalem with the collection he has been taking in the gentile churches for the poor in the Holy City. This is an expression of the solidarity of the world wide church. He hopes then to go west to Spain, calling at Rome on the way. In fact he is arrested in Jerusalem and goes to Rome as a prisoner. We do not know whether he ever made it to Spain as the Bible does not tell us, but it seems unlikely.

December 30th

Romans 16 vv 1-16

All these names. Who were they? Well hopefully we'll meet them in Heaven and then we shall know them. What we see is an ecumenical¹⁹ Church consisting of a number of local congregations or churches, often meeting in houses, where the householders were often local leaders, sometimes supported by leaders sent permanently or temporally from other places (perhaps Paul's staff) and travelling bands of missionaries who expected to be welcomed and supported by the local Christians in the places they travelled. Hence all the names, all the greetings and all the commendations. It is an insight into the dynamic love that motivated the early Church and its ecumenical mission.

December 31st

Romans 16 vv 17-27

If all else fails the troublemakers will have to be disciplined. They cannot be allowed to destroy the Church. Paul is, however, confident in the Church because he is confident in God. This Gospel is true. It does have the power to save. The Church will not only survive but flourish because it is God's Church, the dwelling place of His Spirit, and it has God's work to do in the world. It is still true today. Are we up for it?

¹⁹ This word means that it was the church of the inhabited earth