

The Acts
Of
The Apostles
(continued)

And the
Adventures of
David

Bible Notes
April-June 2021

April 1st (Maundy Thursday)

Acts 19 vv 21-27

The people of Ephesus saw the power of God truly at work in Paul and turned from paganism. Demetrius, the silversmith, became alarmed by the economic implications of this mass conversion. He didn't claim to be a true believer in Diana (or Artemis, depending which translation you are reading). He didn't say anything about the possibility that she was angered or insulted by the Ephesians turning away from her cult. He only mentions the money. I don't know what Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen really believed in. Only God knows that. But his concern is the loss of trade.

Religion and money are a difficult mix. We need money to run churches and to pay for missions and charitable works. There never seems to be enough money. Sometimes churches (and individual Christians) go about raising money in ways which belie their faith. The sale of indulgences in the Middle Ages prompted the Reformation. So, I suppose it did some good! It's too easy to let people think that God is more likely to answer their prayers if they give generously. Taking rents or compulsory tithes was a common way of helping to fund the Church until quite recently and generated a great deal of resentment. There used to be pew rents – families paying for their own pew while the poor sat where they could. Even today there is chancel repair liability which enables the Church to take advantage of some historical quirk to force the owners of certain properties to help repair church buildings. Personally, I believe that the Church is behaving unethically in these cases, though she does so under pressure from the Charity Commissioners who demand that she exploit all her assets to the full. Churches ought to be funded by the free will offerings of their members, giving in the spirit that everything comes from God and we are only giving back what is His anyway.

Lastly, commercial interests may be inimical to Christian principles. Suppose nobody shopped on the Sabbath. Suppose people gave away their surplus income rather than buying consumer goods they didn't need. Suppose Christians boycotted companies engaged in unethical practices like selling goods produced in sweat shops or businesses providing services supplied by workers who are effectively slaves.

April 2nd (Good Friday)

Acts 19 vv 28-34

Why did they bring Jesus before Pontius Pilate? In what way was He a threat? You can supply your own answers from your knowledge of the Gospels and your understanding of human nature. Paul and his companion preachers threatened the trade of the image makers, those whose lives and livelihoods were based on the worship of false gods. Jesus unsettles us because He is the Truth. He shows up falsehood. Simply by being Who He is, He judges us. He was a threat to the position of the rich and powerful Sadducees and the Pharisees who were widely regarded as better than other people and to the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace, dependent on the threat of violence and the complicity of those natives who gained personally by assisting the Romans to keep down their compatriots. Jesus is a threat to all the self-satisfied. Jesus is the answer to the prayers of those who know their need of God, but, to those who think (mistakenly of course) that they can live without God, He is a challenge and a threat – one to be ignored, or, if that is not possible, eliminated. I note the parallel between the crowds in Ephesus who shouted *Great is Diana of the Ephesians* and the crowds in Jerusalem decades earlier who cried *Crucify Him*.

April 3rd (Holy Saturday)

Acts 19 vv 35-41

This *image which fell down from Jupiter* was almost certainly a large meteorite, which the Ephesians took to have come down from heaven as a representation of the goddess Diana or Artemis. A lifeless piece of rock, worshipped by superstitious people, ignorant of its true origin. How different from Jesus Who truly did come down from Heaven, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. A living human being, the Source of all life, crucified, dead and buried. He descended into Hell. Even there, He brought the Gospel to the *souls in prison*, those who had died without the knowledge of Him. Here is a God worth worshipping, a God Who shares our life and death and exalts us to His Right Hand to live with Him forever.

GRANT, O Lord, that as we are baptized into the death of thy blessed Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continual mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him; and that through the grave, and gate of death, we may pass to our joyful resurrection ; for his merits, who died, and was buried, and rose again for us, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

April 4th (Easter Day)

Acts 20 vv 1-7

They met together to break bread on the first day of the week and Paul preached to them. But, Paul was a Jew. The Sabbath is Saturday, the seventh day of the week. Jewish people meet for worship on Saturdays. And yet, here these Jews and their Gentile co-religionists are meeting for worship on Sunday, breaking bread together and hearing God's Word. What's changed and why? Well, everything's changed because Christ is risen.

CHRIST our passover is sacrificed for us : therefore let us keep the feast; Not with the old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness : but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 1 *Cor. v. 7* Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more : death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once : but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin : but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Rom. vi. 9* Christ is risen from the dead : and become the first-fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death : by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die : even so in Christ shall all be made alive. 1 *Cor. xv. 20*. 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*.

ALMIGHTY God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life; We humbly beseech thee, that, as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. *Amen*.

April 5th

Acts 20 vv 8-12

When I was a medical student, we used to hold Christian Union meetings in a room in the nurses' home. It was very hot in there. Some of the speakers used to go on a bit. I'd very often sit on the window sill and think of this story. It wouldn't actually have been so dramatic if I'd fallen out. We were on the ground floor! But I had some sympathy with Eutychus. It is a heart-warming story. It's good to think that we're the same family as Paul and his companions and Eutychus, that they were people like us, and that we share their faith and love for one another.

April 6th

Acts 20 vv 13-16

I wonder why Paul felt that he would like to walk along the shore for a bit while everybody else sailed onto the next place in the boat? Perhaps he needed the exercise. Maybe he wanted some time to himself to work out in his mind what he would say to the Ephesian elders or how he felt about going up to Jerusalem where he expected to be arrested and possibly to be put to death like his Master, Jesus. I think we do need time alone to think things through and also, at least in my experience, it's good to do so whilst walking. The fresh air and the countryside really do make us feel better. If we're under stress, we produce hormones like adrenaline, which can do us harm if we're sitting still and fretting, but which are used for their proper purpose when we are exercising. Paul really loved the Ephesian elders and they loved him, but he knew that, if he went to Ephesus, he would be delayed on his journey to Jerusalem. So he arranged to meet them at Miletus, cutting out some of the travel time and perhaps avoiding being captured by their hospitality.

April 7th

Acts 20 vv 17-21

Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders is sometimes used at ordination services. It sets the standard for the way Christian ministers are to behave. V20 troubles me a bit *how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you*. In v27, he will say, *For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God*. Now, clergy have to be cautious. We have to be tactful, to make allowances. We mustn't break the bruised reed or quench the smouldering flax, by overwhelming someone who has just come to the faith or someone who is bowed down with trouble in the world with too many hard truths. We mustn't put people off Christ by our arrogance even in proclaiming the Truth. If we're a bit more advanced than some other people in the congregation, we mustn't leave them behind or treat them as if they were not as good as we are. We can only share truths with those who can comprehend them. So we may hold back a bit for charitable reasons. But there can also be cowardice. We are afraid of a row. We're worried that we might undermine our own position in the Church by saying what people need to hear even if they don't want to. It's a delicate balance sometimes knowing when to speak and when to be silent.

April 8th

Acts 20 vv 22-27

Again and again on this last journey to Jerusalem, Paul is made aware by the Holy Spirit that trouble awaits him there. In fact he seems to believe that he will be executed there. He, nevertheless, continues his journey. He is taking the money collected by the Gentile Churches to relieve hardship among the Christians in the Holy Land, but could he not have entrusted that task to someone with a lower profile and not gone himself? Part of the reason might be that he wanted to show the Jerusalem Christians that he had not started a new Church for Gentiles but that there is one Church for everybody. As he himself writes in Galatians 3²⁸: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.* They needed to see Paul in the flesh in Jerusalem and hear him speak for himself. There is also the fact that Jesus died in Jerusalem. Paul is following in his Master's footsteps, though he will in fact die in Rome.

April 9th

Acts 20 v28

Take heed therefore unto yourselves and unto all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

In the Greek the word translated here as *overseers* is επισχοποι, which means *bishops*, but it probably means here all ordained ministers. You see what a tremendous responsibility it is to be a minister. The Church of God – all Christian people – has been purchased by the shedding of Christ's Blood. You are that valuable. And so am I. Not only the clergy, we all share this responsibility to take care of one another as individuals so valuable that we have been purchased by Christ's Blood. Christian ministers need the prayers of Christian people. All Christian people need one another's prayers in order to fulfil our vocations as people *bought with a price* – and what a price!

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.*

April 10th

Acts 20 vv 29-31

God's Church is always susceptible to being led astray. Maybe the wrong leaders come from outside. Maybe powerful individuals in the existing congregation arise who introduce false teaching, divert the Church from its proper course of action, or create division within the fellowship. Maybe a whole denomination can be led in the wrong direction by a leadership which is itself lost. People who lead the Church astray do not always do so from malice or for reasons of self-aggrandisement. Sometimes they do what they do for what they mistakenly believe to be the right reasons. How do we distinguish between the true and the false leader or prophet? We do so lovingly and in a prayerful atmosphere. We seek to discern God's Will in prayer and through the study of the Scriptures and in the trusted teaching of the Church over many generations. We use our God-given reason. What is of love? What builds up the Church? What strengthens fellowship? What makes us fitter to do God's work in the world? What do our Christian brothers and sisters think?

The presumption is to respect and to follow the leadership of those ministers who are appointed by the Church. They have the burden of responsibility. The Church has appointed them in the belief that God has called them to this ministry. On the other hand, nobody is perfect or always right. We cannot give unqualified support to people in authority if we have good reasons for believing that they are wrong. We answer to God; we answer to our own consciences. If our consciences are troubled by the direction in which the Church is being led, we approach the problem first in humble prayer.

O ALMIGHTY God, who into the place of the traitor Judas didst choose thy faithful servant Matthias to be of the number of the twelve Apostles; Grant that thy Church, being alway preserved from false Apostles, may be ordered and guided by faithful and true pastors; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*
(Collect for S Matthias' Day.)

April 11th (Easter 1 / Easter 2)

Acts 20 v32

And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.

A couple of days ago, we thought about our value as Christians. We were bought with a price, and what a price! How much God loves us. How much we matter to Him. He builds us up by His grace.

Bodybuilders try to achieve big muscles. God builds us up in the ways that matter – so that we might have great souls. He builds us up into the full stature of Christ, the likeness of Jesus. We share an inheritance with all God's saints, eternal life in the Presence of Him Who is perfect love. I often think that the difficulties we experience as Christians spring from our failing to appreciate what we truly are.

ALMIGHTY Father, who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification; Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

April 12th

Acts 20 vv 33&34

Should the clergy be paid and, if so, how much ought they to receive? Paul made a point of not sponging off the communities to which he ministered. He supported himself as a tentmaker. We have self supporting ministers in the Church today, people who earn their living in some secular employment, and also serve as ordained ministers. Whatever he did himself, however, Paul had no quarrel with other ministers being paid by the Church. I Corinthians 9¹⁴: *Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.* It is generally agreed that paying your minister a stipend so that he does not have to earn his living sets him free to spend more time on preaching and teaching the faith, prayer, leading worship, pastoral work and other gospel tasks. It is true that a priest or a minister working in a factory or office may have the opportunity to be a minister to his co-workers or customers. But so can Christian lay people at work. If you do pay your clergyman, how much should he get? Just enough to survive on? Or a sum reflecting the importance of his position in the community? Should he be better paid than some of the people whose offerings pay his wages? Or should archbishops live in council flats and take the bus?

April 13th

Acts 20 vv 35-38

It is more blessed to give than to receive.

These are the only words of Jesus recorded anywhere other than in the Gospels. I think a lot of people would recognise them, but possibly not know Who said them first! They deserve pondering. If you ponder for long enough, you come round to realising that we can also bless other people when we are gracious enough to allow them to give to us so that they receive the blessing of being givers. Don't get there too fast, though. We must give freely and generously if we hope to be blessed freely and generously. It is a bit like *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us*. We reap what we sow.

April 14th

Acts 21 vv 1-7

This is one of the famous “we” passages in Acts. The writer was of the party. Traditionally, Luke is believed to be the author of Acts as well as the Gospel which bears his name – the beloved physician and companion of S Paul. This isn't a dry itinerary. It isn't teaching speaking to our heads or even to our hearts. It is witness to the fellowship and friendship of these early Christians around S Paul. You can picture them together, travelling, eating and drinking, praying, worshipping, sharing their joys and sorrows. My feeling is that there used to be more of that sort of atmosphere in the charities and missionary societies thirty years ago than there is today. We were members of societies or valued supporters. Local representatives used to come and see us and encourage us in our work for the cause. We met as local groups supporting CMS, the Children's Society, Christian Aid, etc.. Partly for economic reasons and partly because of government legislation (“One size fits all” Charities Acts), that seems to be much less the case now. Also, as church members have become fewer and older, local events and meetings have attracted less support. But charities and missions do seem to me to be more bureaucratic than they used to be, less a family, more a business. We mustn't lose the sense that we are sent (mission) by God to act in charity (love). Christian missions and charities have something which local authorities and government departments don't have. They have far more money and resources and do a great job, but the Church has something to offer which they have not.

April 15th

Acts 21 vv 8-14

The signs are clear. The Holy Spirit warns what is going to happen to Paul in Jerusalem. His friends beg him not to go, but he carries on anyway. I've often been mystified by these passages. Why didn't Paul take heed and give up on his journey to Jerusalem? A few days ago, we considered some of the possible reasons for Paul's insistence on carrying on. He obviously had his reasons and was determined to press on whatever his friends said even in the knowledge that serious trouble awaited him. We may have the facts, but it's not always easy to know what to do with them! Sometimes I find myself praying about a difficult court case that the facts will come out and that the court will come to a true verdict and, perhaps most difficult of all, that the court will know what to do with the facts. What is an appropriate sentence if the defender is guilty? If he is not guilty, what should the authorities be doing to secure justice for the victims of crime, if they got the wrong man this time but have few other clues?

April 16th

Acts 21 vv 15-22

The Law was given by God to Moses on Mt Sinai. God is holy and God's people must be holy. God's people are made holy (sanctified) by the undeserved grace of God. God makes us holy, not because we deserve to be His people, but because He loves us. God's Law is summarised in the commandments to love God and one another. God blesses His people in innumerable ways and our part of the covenant relationship is to live in accordance with God's Law. The Law as given by God to Moses includes commandments like *Thou shalt not steal*, which obviously apply to everybody, everywhere and for ever. It also includes commandments about not eating pork, which we believe don't apply to us Gentiles. There are commandments about which it is less clear whether they apply to everyone for ever or just to Israel. *Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy* might be one such. It was a very big step for the first Christians, who were all Jews, to accept that Gentile believers in the Jewish God did not have to obey all the Law's demands. And, if Gentile converts didn't have to be circumcised and could eat pork, why should Jewish Christians not enjoy the same freedom? Some Jewish Christians today keep all those requirements of the Law and this was the position taken by James and the early Church.

April 17th

Acts 21 vv 23-26

Some people in Jerusalem evidently didn't trust Paul to be honouring this understanding, that Gentile Christians only had to obey what we might call the moral Law, but that Jewish Christians should continue to be circumcised and to observe the rest of the ceremonial Law as well. Paul is happy to demonstrate that he accepts that the whole Law is still binding on Jewish disciples by supporting the completion of a Nazarite vow which four men had previously taken. Numbers 6 explains how a man or a woman would become a Nazarite for a period. It was a time of special devotion to God, marked by abstaining from alcohol and even from grapes and not cutting your hair or shaving. There was a ritual to go through at the conclusion of the vowed period. This is what Paul did and supported those other four men who had done the same thing. The only other probable Nazarites we know by name are Samson and John the Baptists whose whole lives were dedicated to God in this way. It was a very big step for Jewish Christians to accept that Gentile converts could become worshippers of the God of Israel without adopting all these customs contained in the Law which God Himself had given to Moses. It was a paradigm change. Some Christians today are suggesting that there is another paradigm shift occurring in our own generation, that the Church's current official teaching on matters regarding identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, based on the Bible and Christian tradition, is at odds with the beliefs and practice which now predominate at least in western societies and ought now to be changed. The Church of England is running a consultation and would welcome any contribution you might have to this discussion. See <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith>

April 18th (Easter 2 / Easter 3)

Acts 21 vv 27-30

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given thine only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an ensample of godly life; Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The plan didn't work out as James and Paul hoped. Some Jews, who already believed Paul to be a traitor and a threat to the Jewish faith and people, were incensed because they believed that he had taken Gentiles into the Jewish Temple where they were not permitted to be. There are

two mosques now where the Jewish Temple used to be and, on our parish visit to the Holy Land, we saw this kind of anger when one of the women in the party attempted to enter dressed in a manner which the Muslim authorities thought inappropriate. In Paul's case, a riot was provoked. Today's collect talks about Jesus *as both a sacrifice for sin, and also an ensample of godly life*. We are all sinners and some of the worst sins are those committed in the name of religion. We do need to be forgiven, for our relationship with God to be restored, so that we may live as God's children as Jesus is God's Child. He is both the sacrifice which secures our forgiveness and the example of godly life which (Whom) we are set free to follow by our atonement with God in Him.

April 19th

Acts 21 vv 31-33

There are several parallels between the account of Paul's martyrdom and that of his Master. By and large, the Roman authorities in both stories try to protect the principles from the Jewish mob and from the scheming Sadducees and Pharisees. It was important for Luke to make this point for those who would read the Gospel and Acts. The Christian faith is not opposed to the Pax Romana, to Roman Peace. The Roman authorities have no reason to persecute Christians. We are not a threat to the authorities in the sense that we might be political revolutionaries, stirring up violence, refusing to pay taxes, etc.. We are, however, a threat to all those who live their lives in the service of wealth and power and material goods in the sense that our very lives as Christians are (or at least should be) demonstrations of the more excellent way, the way of love.

April 20th

Acts 21 vv 34-36

Some cried one thing, some another.

This is like the crowd at Ephesus. People are making a lot of noise. Many of them probably don't even understand what they are making a noise about. Nobody is listening. Nobody is seeking to understand the other person's point of view, the truth, what is really going on. Isn't it often like this in politics, in the press, on social media, in arguments in the home or between friends, in pub fights. Everybody is shouting. Nobody is listening. *Be still, then, and know that I am God.*

April 21st

Acts 21 vv 37-40

Paul spoke to the chief captain in Greek. Greek (not Latin) was at this time the language spoken by educated people in the Roman Empire, especially in the East. Uneducated people spoke only their local languages. So, by speaking Greek, Paul showed himself to be a civilised person, the same class as the chief captain. (A police recruit said that one of the first lessons he learnt was to distinguish between the members of the public you call *sir* and the members of public you call *mate*.) Obviously, there is a danger of injustice if the authorities treat the middle classes with deference and show less respect to working class people. However it served the purpose of getting Paul a hearing. No, he wasn't one of those rabble rousers and rebels who were in the habit of causing such nuisance to the Romans. Paul was a Roman citizen, a status of honour which gave him certain rights denied to others. It wasn't right that other people did not have these rights and, in the very long run, the Christian faith has worked for equal rights for all, but we still have a long way to go in the world today. Paul then addressed the crowds in Aramaic, their native language, the language Jesus spoke. It's always good to speak in a way that your hearers can understand, something that professional people like doctors and clergy and teachers sometimes struggle with. Pray for us preachers that we might preach the Word and do so in a manner that it can be understood and acted upon.

April 22nd

Acts 22 vv 1-16

Paul then tells his story. The story of the Conversion of S Paul is so important that, like the story of Peter's vision of the sheet full of clean & unclean beasts, it is repeated. In Acts 9, the great persecutor is converted & becomes the great evangelist. In Acts 10, the apostle known as the Rock is shown that God welcomes Gentiles equally into the Church with Jews. Addressing the crowd at Jerusalem, Paul reminds people of who he had been. He was a Roman citizen from an important city. He was zealous for the Jewish faith, which had studied under the great master Gamaliel. He was so zealous that he had persecuted the Church, believing it to be a threat to his ancestral faith & an insult to the God of Israel. & Jesus had graciously made Himself know to Paul & none of that mattered anymore. He had found Christ.

April 23rd

Acts 22 vv 17-21

So Paul returned to Jerusalem after his conversion and Jesus appeared to him in a vision and told him to leave the city. And Paul argued with Jesus. He thought he knew best. It seems extraordinary, but how often do we think that we know better than God about how we should live our lives? We argue that the principles laid down in the Bible are impractical in C21 Britain. We quickly conclude that we know better than the Church when we don't agree with its teaching or practices. We turn a deaf ear to conscience. We refuse to listen either to God or to other people. We find reasons for not doing what God is calling us to do. In fact, like Paul, we kick against the pricks, but, like him, we shall never live fulfilled and useful lives unless we live in accordance with God's Will for us.

April 24th

Acts 22 vv 22&23

Why this strong reaction? If they thought that Paul was wrong, they didn't have to believe him. They could listen to what he said and rationally and prayerfully make up their own minds in the light of any evidence. They could have trusted other people listening to Paul to do the same. That is how we learn and society progresses: freedom of speech, rational enquiry, examination of the evidence and prayer. That last one might surprise some people, but the universe only ultimately makes sense in the light shed on it by the One Who created it. The world of time and space only makes sense in the light of eternity.

In the last couple of decades in countries like ours, freedom of speech has come under threat. There are demands that nobody should be allowed to say anything which some people might find offensive. Internet mobs shout down people whose views are different from what the multitude think (or pretend to think to preserve their own status). Speakers whose views are thought to be inappropriate are cancelled or no-platformed. Our words are scrutinised in case we might have said, even unwittingly, something which be construed as racist, sexist, trans phobic or homophobic. It will all end in tears when our basic human right to express ourselves and to share our views is taken away whether by a censorious public opinion or by people in positions of authority who wish to limit the range of what may be said.

April 25th (Easter 3 / 4, S Mark)

Acts 22 vv 24-30

ALMIGHTY God, who shewest to them that be in error the light of thy truth, to the intent that they may return into the way of righteousness; Grant unto all them that are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's Religion, that they may eschew those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

My first thoughts on reading today's verses were how terrible and stupid it was that in Roman times an accused person could be examined by scourging, presumably beaten until he tells the truth (or until he tells the torturer what he wants to hear just to make it stop) and how much better it was to be a Roman citizen like Paul and exempt from such barbaric treatment. Paul is not ashamed to take advantage of his privilege. You didn't have to be born a Roman in order to be a citizen. Any respectable person living in the empire could become a citizen at a price and then his descendants would themselves automatically be Roman citizens. Paul inherited his citizenship. The captain had paid for his, not quite as high a status as being born to it.

Then I looked at the collect, praying for grace, as it does, that Christians *may eschew those things that are contrary to their profession* and I thought of all those long centuries in which supposedly Christian countries and even the Church practised torture. Torture still goes on in the world today. We really do need to pray for God's grace that we might live up to our Christian calling to become like Christ.

April 26th

Acts 23 vv 1-3

Paul rebuked the high priest for presuming to judge him by the law when he himself had acted contrary to the law in commanding one of his acolytes to strike Paul. Even if everybody is sure that the defendant is guilty of the most heinous crimes, court cases have themselves to be conducted strictly in accordance with the law and with the principles of justice. Not only is the aim to secure a true verdict – guilty or not guilty – and to impose a just and appropriate sentence if the verdict is guilty – but also the public must have confidence in the process. This generally means that trials should be held in public (unless there are very good

reasons why not, such as national security or the extreme vulnerability of the defendant or witnesses), due process should be followed such that defence and prosecution have equal arms, the charges against the accused should be clear and definite. If these conditions are not met it is likely that justice will not be achieved or that the public will distrust the courts, which in itself undermines the rule of law. We ought to pray for those who administer justice.

That it may please thee to bless and keep the Magistrates, giving them grace to execute justice, and to maintain truth;

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord

It has become apparent that the Church of England's only disciplinary procedures fall very far short of these ideals (secretive, vague definition of what constitutes an offence, bias in favour of the prosecution) and the Church is in the process of reforming them. This process too needs our prayers.

April 27th

Acts 23 vv 4&5

Why does Paul say that he did not know that Ananias was the high priest? He does accept that, if he had known that Ananias was the high priest, he should not have reviled him even though Ananias had behaved in such a despicable manner. I confess I find it hard to swallow, but we do have to treat our rulers with respect because of their office even if they personally as individuals hardly seem to deserve it.

Paul might not have recognised Ananias simply because he was short-sighted, which he is often believed to have been. Or he might not have recognised Ananias because he had been away from Jerusalem for so long.

It is possible that Paul didn't recognise Ananias as the true high priest because he was an appointee of the Herod family who ruled under Roman patronage. High priests were supposed to be direct descendants of Moses' brother Aaron which Ananias was almost certainly not.

Or Paul might have meant that a person in Ananias' position who behaved as he did did not deserve the respect which is due to a high priest.

April 28th

Acts 23 vv 6-8

As we see here, the two main religious groups in Israel at this time differed on some important points of doctrine. The Sadducees didn't believe in spiritual beings such as angels. They didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. I suppose the best of them thought that you just had to do the best you could to follow God's Law in this life and then that was it. Looking at life this way, they were pragmatists, attempting to work with the reality of Roman government to preserve the peace (and their own position). The Pharisees, however, (of whom Paul had been one) did believe both in spiritual beings and *life in the world to come*. The Christian Church too has been riven by doctrinal disputes. Some of them matter, such as that Jesus is one Christ though fully human and totally God, and some probably don't, like whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father. The overriding principle, however, is love, and our championing of what we believe to be the Truth ought never to be at the expense of our first duty which is to love one another as Christ loved us.

ALMIGHTY God, who hast instructed thy holy Church with the heavenly doctrine of thy Evangelist Saint Mark; Give us grace, that, being not like children carried away with every blast of vain doctrine, we may be established in the truth of thy holy Gospel; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

April 29th

Acts 23 vv 9-11

Again, there was no calm, reasoned debate. The different parties became over-excited and violent such that Paul had to be rescued from them and taken back to the castle. They were no nearer to ascertaining the truth. The problem both Pharisees and Sadducees faced was no closer to being resolved. Paul was neither vindicated nor condemned. Their over-excitability and threatened violence had achieved nothing. I'm writing these notes just after that meeting of Handforth Parish Council went viral. People who presumably had stood for office with the intention of benefitting their local community fell out with one another so badly that their meeting became a disgrace and a laughing stock. I think we're all too aware how easily things can go wrong like this. But, that night, Jesus spoke to Paul and told him to be of good cheer. Here is the answer – to take these situations of conflict to God in prayer and to listen to what He is telling us. I'll try.

April 30th

Acts 23 vv 12-24

Paul's opponents can't get they want by legal means. So they decide to take matters into their own hands. We never knew that Paul had any family until his nephew suddenly came on the scene here. We're not always aware of the families of public figures. Sometimes we're selfish and demand that politicians and professional people devote all their time and energy to us the public, not allowing them peace to rest themselves, to have lives outside their professions, and to care for the people who love them. I sometimes feel sorry for the family of public figures at their funerals. The whole service may be about honouring a great prime minister or film star or general with the result that his immediate family, the people who loved him best, are sidelined. Or, worse still, the public may intrude into the private lives of the families of famous people. Note that the Roman captain treats Paul with respect and consideration even though he is a prisoner. I sometimes wonder naughtily whether these forty men who weren't going to eat till they had killed Paul starved themselves to death when they were thwarted, but I doubt it.

May 1st (S Philip & S James)

Acts 23 vv 25-35

O ALMIGHTY God, whom truly to know is everlasting life; Grant us perfectly to know thy Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life; that, following the steps of thy holy Apostles, Saint Philip and Saint James, we may stedfastly walk in the way that leadeth to eternal life; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The captain, who is only now named as Claudius Lysias (presumably because his name wasn't relevant to the story) is really at a loss. He has no evidence to indicate that Paul has broken Roman law. The Jewish authorities, however, are insistent that Paul is a malefactor. If Lysias doesn't do what they want, there will be a riot. Note the parallels with the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate. Not knowing what he should do, Lysias passes the problem on to his boss, the governor Felix, who won't know what to do either.

Today's collect does reveal to us the way in which we should walk, the only true way, the only way to attain the knowledge of God and everlasting life.

May 2nd (Easter 4 / 5)

Acts 24 vv 1-9

O ALMIGHTY God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

The chief priests and the elders employed the orator Tertullus to speak on their behalf. We're not always very good at putting our case. Maybe we can't find the words. We may not fully understand what the case is all about or the relevant legislation. In some cases, perhaps in court or facing an employer or tribunal, we might feel overawed and even intimidated. So we might employ a lawyer or invite a friend along. I am concerned that lawyers cost a lot of money and people may not be able to afford the representation they need. Legal Aid is generally recognised to be inadequate. Tertullus is everybody's nightmare of a lawyer. He uses flowery language, he shamelessly flatters the governor and doesn't really get to the point. He doesn't list any specific charges against Paul, just general ones to the effect that the Sanhedrin don't like what he stands for. But Who speaks for us in the heavenly court? Who is our Mediator and Advocate? Who knows us inside out, knows all our sins and weaknesses in unavoidable detail and yet represents us before the eternal Judge and secures our freedom despite our guilt?

May 3rd

Acts 24 vv 10-13

You've got to admire Paul as a man. He keeps his head. There he is standing before the awe-inspiring and intimidating figure of the Roman governor. The high priest and others of the Jewish elders are ranged against him. Their case has been put by the professional orator Tertullus. He knows only too well that Jesus, brought before the Roman authorities by the high priest, suffered a terrible death. And yet, calmly and boldly, he states the facts of the case, much more straightforwardly than the professional Tertullus. Paul was naturally a very gifted man, but it is surely because he has been with Jesus that his gifts attain their potential. Jesus is our friend in our trials on earth as well as before the heavenly court.

May 4th

Acts 24 vv 14-16

Paul is sometimes accused of having started a new religion. There was the Jewish faith based on the worship of the one, true God Who had made Himself known in the Law and the Prophets. Then came Jesus Who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets – the promised Messiah. One possible way to understand what Jesus set out to do is to think of Him as a reformer of Judaism. Like the Old Testament prophets, He recalls the people to the true meaning of the Law, rebukes them for their disobedience to God, warns them of judgment to come if they do not repent, and promises forgiveness and mercy if they will only return to God. Jesus preaches that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, which is a threat as well as a promise. When justice is done, not only will the victims of human wickedness receive the restoration which is due to them, but also their oppressors too will receive what they deserve. Plainly, in the Gospels, Jesus extends this age-old message to Israel to the whole world. Jesus, however, had a ministry on earth of only three years. He established His Church on the foundation of the apostles, but it was they and those who believed the apostles' testimony who, in the power of the Holy Ghost, built the Church, as we continue to build it today, inspired by the same Holy Spirit. You may remember that story where Jesus ascends into Heaven when His earthly ministry is over and the angels ask Him what provision He has made for His work to be continued. He tells them that He has left it to His followers. The angels are unimpressed and ask what is Plan B for when Christians let Him down. He replies that there is no Plan B. Anyway, it is sometimes suggested that the apostles, especially Paul, took the story of Jesus and founded a new religion, detached from the Jewish faith which preceded it and of which Jesus was a member. Paul makes quite clear in today's verses that this is not the case. The Christian Church - including all nations, the Gentiles as well as the Jews; the Gospel message - is the fulfilment of everything which has gone before, the point to which the whole Old Testament was intended by God to bring us. We have to be very careful not to seem to justify anti-Semitism. Paul is quite clear (Romans 11) that God has not cast off His people (the Jews). Over the last two millennia, despite terrible and disgraceful persecution, Jewish people have maintained high standards of integrity in accordance with biblical teaching, but Christ is for them as well as for us Gentiles.

May 5th

Acts 24 vv 17-21

It was Paul who instituted the Sunday collection. There was great poverty in Judaea and Paul encouraged the Gentile Churches he founded in other places to make a collection for the people there. This is the money Paul is referring to here. We might call giving money to the poor an act of charity, which it is. It doesn't do, however, to forget that charity means love. It is an act of love to share the good things which God has given us. This sending of money from the Gentile Churches to Judaea was an expression of the essential unity of the Church (Jewish & Gentile, wherever there are Christians throughout the world, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church). More than an expression of unity, this sharing strengthened and deepened the unity of the Church. We exchange Christmas presents as an expression of our love and doing so deepens our love for one another. It is too easy to patronise poorer people to whom we give money. Don't forget, *It is better to give than to receive*. It is our privilege to give what God has given us for the welfare of other people. It is also a two way street. The Gentiles had money to share with the people in Judaea. The Church in Judaea had other gifts to share with the Gentile Churches – the Scriptures, prayer, the ministry of the apostles and others. It is all one Church. God has given us different gifts to share for the common good. Rich Churches like ours may well send money and other resources to Churches in poorer parts of the world. We also receive from them what they have to offer. God is glorified in that we all thank Him for the gifts which everyone of us has to share and for His Spirit of generosity which leads us to do so.

If you look in older prayerbooks, you will see that only at Holy Communion is there provision made for a collection to be taken and that is intended to be alms for the poor. Nowadays, we take collections at every service and the bulk of the money is spent on clergy pay, buildings and administration. There are reasons for this, but it is something worth reflecting on.

May 6th

Acts 24 vv 22-25

Felix keeps a steady head and behaves sensibly. He says he won't act until he has more information – very often a sensible idea. He can see that Paul is no threat and treats him courteously and respectfully. Felix is married to a Jewish woman, Drusilla, and presumably knows something of his wife's faith. He knew enough that Paul's preaching unsettled his complacency. Christians often talk about revivals, times when great preachers (like, say, Billy Graham) attract vast crowds and large numbers of people offer their lives to the Lord. But you can only revive what once lived. If the love of an individual for Christ or the love of a nation has grown cold, it is possible, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to revive that love. If people know the bible stories, a selection of hymns and at least the Lord's Prayer, the preacher has something to work on, to revive. It is harder in the sort of country ours has become. Many people don't know what we're talking about when we talk about the Christian virtues, about sin and repentance, judgment, prayer and the power of God. They don't know the hymns we sing or the prayers we say. And yet, they are made in the image of God. They have God-given consciences. Christ died for them. It is harder than it was in the 1950s, but not impossible. Nothing is impossible with God.

May 7th

Acts 24 vv 26&27

Pontius Pilate could find no reason to execute Jesus, but he was under tremendous pressure to do so from both the Jewish authorities and the mob they stirred up. The Roman authorities could find nothing against Paul, but again the Jewish authorities wanted him got out of the way. His preaching was a threat to our human complacency before God (our *I'm all right, Jack* attitudes). The Gospel is especially a threat to the complacency of the rich and powerful. Christians turn the world upside down. Even if he'd wanted to, however, Felix couldn't dispose of Paul as Pilate thought he could dispose of Jesus. Paul was a Roman citizen and entitled to a fair trial. Felix also respected Paul and thought there was something in what he said. Pilate seems to have respected Jesus, but that was not enough to save Him. Anyway, Felix puts off making a decision and eventually leaves Paul for his successor to deal with. He also hoped for a bribe to let Paul go. Corruption was far from unknown in the Roman Empire.

May 8th

Acts 25 vv 1-3

Even after two years, the Jewish authorities hadn't given up on their attempt to do away with Paul. I've been surprised by how long animosities survive. Years pass and still we resent what somebody said or did or failed to do in the past. It might not be a very big thing, but brooding over it over the years has made it much bigger. These resentments can be stored up within families and even within Churches. There is no true forgiveness. And yet we are taught to pray *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.*

May 9th (Easter 5 / 6)

Acts 25 vv 4-12

O LORD, from whom all good things do come; Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that be good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

So, we pray this collect. We seek God's grace to think what is good, to know what is good, to do what is good, to be good. We seek God's grace to be good in everything that we do, the way we look after our families, the way we do the work we're paid for, the way we spend our leisure time, our lives as members of the Christian Church.

Festus didn't know what to do. Like Felix before him, he didn't want to injure an innocent Roman citizen, but neither did he want to upset the Jewish authorities. He didn't want complaints about him to be sent to Rome! The Jews failed to make a convincing case against Paul, but wouldn't give up trying to convict him of something. Paul ably defended himself. When Festus tried to find a solution by proposing a trial in Jerusalem, Paul played his ace of trumps. He appealed to Caesar. Now, Festus couldn't hand him over to the Jews. Neither could he quietly dispose of Paul himself.

May 10th

Acts 25 vv 13-21

Herod Agrippa was one of the Herod family (grandson of the one who murdered the baby boys at Jerusalem and nephew of Herod Antipas to whom Pilate sent Jesus when he didn't know what to do with Him.) Note the parallel. Paul was entitled to know the charges against him and to confront his accusers. This is a right which is always under threat. In terrorist trials, the accused may not always be allowed to

know the full case against him. In abuse cases, the understandable need to protect the alleged victim, may result in the accused not being able to mount a full defence. Even people accused of such vile crimes ought to be able to expect a fair trial.

May 11th

Acts 25 vv 22-27

I mentioned earlier that the Church of England's disciplinary procedures have been found to be contrary to the principles of natural justice. In one case I know of, one of the "crimes" the defendant was accused of had been redacted from the list of offences for which he was on trial. How he was supposed to answer when he didn't even know what he was supposed to have done is a mystery. V27 of today's reading demonstrates that such a state of affairs was understood to be unreasonable even 2,000 years ago.

The Church is the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The Church is a divine institution, inaugurated by Christ Himself, Who is her one foundation. She is also a human institution. She has to deal with management and money and buildings. She has to comply with relevant legislation. She has to care for the people who work for her. And, yes, she has to have disciplinary procedures for when things go wrong. Obviously, the way human beings conduct the Church's affairs in the world ought to be informed by their experience of the divine. The way the Church manages the people, buildings and money in her care ought to be enlightened by the Light of Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit. But, only too often, the Church proves to be worse at these tasks than the world outside is. It is only too easy for Christians in positions of authority to come to believe that they have a divine right to override the standards of decency which ought to be common to all human beings. The Church should be setting an example to politics, business, the legal system and the other institutions of human society, not accepting lower standards than the ones they live by for the way in which she conducts her own affairs.

In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our wealth; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment, *Good Lord, deliver us.* We sinners do beseech thee to hear us, O Lord God; and that it may please thee to rule and govern thy holy Church universal in the right way; *We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.*

May 12th

Acts 26 vv 1-8

Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?

Here perhaps is the sticking point for many people. The idea of one God is appealing. Most people have some kind of religious or spiritual impulses. We feel instinctively that there must be something out there, an ultimate explanation for everything. It makes sense that God is one. There can only be one first and final cause. Even some religions which appear to have a multitude of gods regard all these different gods as simply different manifestations of the One. The idea that there is an essential unity of everything makes sense to us. Most people pray, though some may do so only when they are desperate. The moral codes of the world's great religions are generally admired – based as they are on such concepts as universal love and the Golden Rule (Do to others what you would want them to do to you.) Who would argue against justice, mercy, honesty, peace, integrity, loyalty, fidelity? In fact, many people's criticisms of organised religion are based not on finding fault with what we preach, but rather on our failure to live up to our preaching. But is it an incredible thing that God should raise the dead? Is it an incredible thing to think that God is intimately involved in the affairs of this world? Is it an incredible thing to think that He holds our lives in His Hands, that He looks after us individually and that He holds us to account for our lives? Is it an incredible thing to believe that *he shall come to judge the quick and the dead, to believe in the Holy Ghost: The holy Catholick Church; The Communion of Saints: The Forgiveness of sins: The Resurrection of the body, And the Life everlasting.*

Nothing is impossible with God. If we truly believe in God and understand anything of what we believe, we understand that God can do anything. There are no limits on God. God is not limited by what we are capable of believing. God is God and all things are possible to Him.

May 13th (Ascension Day)

Acts 26 vv 9-18

GRANT, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. *Amen*

After His Resurrection, Jesus was seen by Mary Magdalene and the apostles and hundreds more. Then He ascended into heaven. But He had not left us comfortless. He sent the Holy Spirit, another Comforter. Just as Jesus Christ is our Comforter, so is the Holy Spirit, the second and third persons of the Blessed Holy Trinity, one with the Father in the work of creation, redemption and sanctification. After our Lord's Ascension into Heaven there have been other reports of His manifesting Himself to people on earth, the best known surely being His appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus. He turned Paul's life around completely and used him in the wonderful ways we read about in our bibles. Paul became at that instant a citizen of Heaven (or perhaps when he was baptised shortly afterwards by Ananias). Paul's heart and mind had thither ascended, fitting him to serve God here on earth and at last to dwell continually with Jesus. Our encounters with Christ may be less dramatic than Paul's, but no less are we Christians citizens of heaven, hearts and minds thither ascending that we may accomplish our work for Christ here on earth and with Him continually dwell, enabled to do so solely by God's grace.

May 14th

Acts 26 vv 19 v19

Whereupon, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.
We can all be thankful that Paul acted on the revelation he had received from Jesus. He gave his life to the Lord and, from that moment onwards, devoted himself to his calling. His missionary work established congregations across the eastern Mediterranean, the nucleus of the Great Church to which we, by grace, belong. Paul's epistles have informed the Church for two thousand years explaining our faith and teaching us how to behave. So, how do we respond to the heavenly vision? Do we ever get tired or grow cold in His service? Or do we apply ourselves with the same dedication as S Paul in the very different circumstances of the lives we lead today?

May 15th

Acts 26 vv 20&21

There doesn't seem anything objectionable to me in telling people to turn to God and to repent of their sins and do good works. So why did the Jews want to kill Paul? Why indeed did they want to kill Jesus?

Why, what hath my Lord done?

What makes this rage and
spite?

He made the lame to run,
he gave the blind their sight,

Sweet injuries!

Yet they at these themselves
displease,
and 'gainst him rise.

They rise, and needs will have
my dear Lord made away;

a murderer they save,
the Prince of Life they slay.

Yet steadfast he to suffering
goes,

that he his foes from thence
might free.

I don't want to single out the Jews here. It is human, not Jewish specifically, to reject God and His ways. But why? What sense does it make to reject the love of the One Who made us? You can probably think of a number of reasons why people reject God, but, in the end, it is irrational. It just does not make sense to reject the love of the One Who created Heaven & earth.

May 16th (Sunday after Ascension / Easter 7)

Acts 26 v22

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.*

So how did Paul carry on with his life, despite all the opposition he faced and the plots against him? God helped him. God does help us in our daily lives. We can take everything which is on our minds to God in prayer. God does not leave us comfortless; He sends us His Holy Ghost to comfort us. Paul studied the Scriptures. The Scriptures bear witness of Jesus. In the pages of the Bible, we find the Word of eternal life – Jesus. The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible and the Holy Spirit us leads us into deeper understandings of its meaning. We should, therefore, read the Bible prayerfully. Paul knew that he, like all Christians, was already a citizen of Heaven. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we seek to live by Heaven's laws here on earth. Paul knew that there was for him, as there is for all Christians, a home there waiting for us. *Send to us thine Holy Ghost to comfort us, and exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before*

May 17th

Acts 26 v23

That book *Living in Love and Faith* which is one of the resources the Church of England is offering us as we consider how the timeless truths of God's Law apply today in regard to human relationships makes the point that the Bible is fundamental to our understanding of God and His Will for us. It also sadly remarks that many Christians are not as familiar with the Bible as they ought to be. Paul knew his Bible, what we call the Old Testament, and in its light came to an understanding of Jesus. Christ would come into this world. He would suffer and die. He would be the first to rise from the dead. The eternal life Christ reveals through His own Death & Resurrection is eternal light for Jew and Gentile alike. It's all there in the Bible. It is very sad that the Bible is so little read, not only in the world outside the Church, but also among Christians.

May 18th

Acts 26 vv 24-32

Any idea of resurrection seems most unlikely to the governor Festus. He thinks Paul has lost his mind in scholarly speculation. Agrippa knows something of the story of Jesus and claims to be almost convinced to become a Christian. Why hold back? In case Festus mocked him? Because it would make him unpopular with the Jews he ruled over? Because Jesus might ask him to give up his wealth and power? There might be lots of reasons why King Agrippa didn't want to surrender his life to Jesus. The reality, of course, is that there is nothing which he might have to give up that is anything like as valuable as what he would gain by knowing Jesus. But there is no half way house. Either you are a Christian or you are not. So it wasn't good enough that Agrippa was almost converted. The only way is to commit wholeheartedly. *Take up your cross and follow me.*

As a Christian, Paul would rejoice to see his persecutors converted.

May 19th

Acts 27 vv 1-10

This is one of the famous “we” passages. The author of Acts (almost certainly Luke the gospel writer, physician and friend of Paul) was present for these adventures. I find it interesting that the prisoners are not taken to Rome in any military or government vessel but that the centurion organises passage in ordinary commercial vessels. Sailing was hazardous in those days and sailors tried to keep fairly close to land. In his travels, Paul was shipwrecked at least three times. Julius, the centurion, obviously respects and trusts Paul because he allows him to go ashore and visit his friends at Sidon. Paul respected Roman authority and human authority in general. It was only when the authorities set themselves against the Gospel that it was legitimate for a Christian to rebel.

May 20th

Acts 27 vv 10-14

The fast referred to is the Day of Atonement. So this was Autumn. Sailing was dangerous enough in Summer and to be avoided, if at all possible, altogether in Winter. Paul recognised the danger. Paul seems to have been a very talented man, not just in things we would expect like preaching and Bible study but also in other areas of life. He appears to be a very capable man with a commanding presence. I suppose they didn't want to be held up for several months waiting for the Winter to pass before they continued their journey, especially since the place where they were wasn't a good place to winter in. Not surprisingly, the centurion took the word of the owner and the master, the “experts” over Paul's. Paul, however, turned out to be right. We've been reminded in the pandemic that scientists advise, but politicians decide. You might employ an accountant to fill in your tax form for you, but you are still legally responsible for getting it right. It is foolish not to take notice of people who know what they are talking about, but we still have to take responsibility for our own actions. It can be very hard to know what is the right thing to do even with the best of advice. People like politicians and judges and others with heavy responsibilities to bear need our prayers.

May 21st

Acts 27 vv 15-20

Acts 27, apart from its religious significance, is one of the best accounts of a shipwreck which we have from the Ancient World. We see the measures they attempted to save the ship. We can imagine the desperation of the crew and passengers. The boat referred to would normally have been towed by the ship. They hauled it in to keep it safe from being smashed up and possibly used it in the next operation which was to tie ropes around the hull to keep it together as the wind and the crashing waves twisted and separated the planks. They took down the sail in case they should be driven aground. They threw out some of the cargo and some of the tackle to lighten the ship and to keep it afloat. In the darkness of the storm, they couldn't navigate by the sun or stars. They were lost in the darkness. The wind and the sea were raging. The ship was breaking up under them. No wonder they despaired.

May 22nd

Acts 27 vv 21-26

If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs wrote Rudyard Kipling in his famous poem "If". One very cold Saturday morning when I lived at Ramsgate I had been out for a run and was having a wash when the 'phone rang. Another clergyman was taking a funeral that morning and the family wanted him to read Kipling's "If". Did I have the words? Yes, I did, and so I stood there in the bitter cold in a room much more exposed to the public gaze than where I currently live dressed only in a towel reciting "If" into the telephone and hoping that the condensation on the glass sufficiently obscured the window to preserve my modesty. If you know the poem, you can probably think why a family might choose it for a funeral. I thought of it at once when I read today's passage about S Paul. He kept his head when all about him were losing theirs. But, looking up the poem, there is a very important difference between Kipling's hero and Paul. Kipling's hero relies on his own strength as a man. Paul relies on Jesus.

None of us is sufficient to overcome all of life's challenges. If we rely on our own strength, we shall fail. Christ, however, is all sufficient. He Himself told Paul, *My grace is sufficient for you*. If we rely on Jesus, we shall never be defeated.

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

Fearing that the storm would cast them on a lee shore and sink the ship, the sailors put out anchors at the stern. This would have the effect of stopping their progress and keeping the bows pointing towards land. This was the right judgment. They then thought that they could abandon ship, leaving the passengers on board to take their chance, in the boat. Paul realised what was happening and made the right judgment call to cast the boat adrift.

The work of the Holy Spirit is not only in religious and churchy things. In the Bible, we read about Him inspiring the craftsmen who made the vessels and ornaments for the tabernacle as well as inspiring the words of the prophets. Our whole lives, as Christians, are an offering to God. We seek to do everything in His Name – from the most spiritual task to the most mundane. So, we can commit everything we do to the Lord and ask for His help in performing all our daily tasks.

Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see,
and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee.

A man that looks on glass,
on it may stay his eye;
or if he pleaseth, through it
pass,
and then the heaven espy.

All may of thee partake;
nothing can be so mean,
which with this tincture, "for
thy sake,"

will not grow bright and
clean.

A servant with this clause
makes drudgery divine:
who sweeps a room, as for
thy laws,
makes that and the action
fine.

This is the famous stone
that turneth all to gold;
for that which God doth
touch and own
cannot for less be told.

May 24th

Acts 27 vv 33-44

Again, Paul kept his head. He insisted that they all should eat, no matter how desperate, tired and, no doubt, cold they were. We have to look after ourselves if we are going to function at all well, play our part and not be a burden on others. It says that he took the bread and gave thanks to God for it. He kept his head and he remembered God in the midst of the confusion and fear around him. Sometimes, when we are overwhelmed by the urgency of life's challenges, we may forget about God. Yet is on God we must rely whatever may be going on around us. I'm reminded of Jacob Astley's prayer before the Battle of Edgehill. *O Lord! thou knowest how busy I must be this day: if I forget thee, do not thou forget me.*

May 25th

Acts 28 vv 1-6

Lottery rats! When the National Lottery was introduced, there were quite often reports of not very nice people winning millions. Conversely, there were people who thought that it was worth staking money on the lottery in the hope of winning a lot of money for a worthy cause and all they achieved was to lose their stake. I believe that the naive trustees of one charity lost thousands of pounds in this way. Human beings expect there to be justice and get angry when there is not. There is a good reason to expect justice. The universe is run by the God of Justice. He commands us to act justly in our human affairs. But it is not as straightforward as nurses winning the lottery, adulterers losing their stakes and escaping murderers being bitten by poisonous snakes. There is space left for faith. There is mercy. Time and opportunities are allowed for repentance. By no means all suffering is punishment for sin. Some good fortune is just that – fortune or chance, not a reward for merit. Such good fortune may even be a temptation. Some suffering has a redemptive purpose.

In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our wealth; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment,

Good Lord, deliver us.

Paul took charge again after the shipwreck. He must have been a remarkable man.

May 26th

Acts 28 vv 7-10

Among his many other gifts, Paul (and some of the others in the early Church) had this gift of healing. It is a powerful witness to the truth of the Gospel – though not even miracles convince people whose minds are closed. Some Christians believe that we ought to see healings like these and other miracles as a matter of course in the Church all the time, right down to the present age. Others believe that the Age of Miracles is long past, that it closed when the last page of the Bible was written. It is possible that there were more miracles in historical times when there were more people who had faith in their possibility. It may also be that we now have scientific explanations for cures which former generations regarded as miraculous. Perhaps, we don't need so many miracles today now that God has blessed us with so much progress in scientific medicine. Miracles and healings are a matter of God's grace. We have no right to demand miracles. Neither do we have the right to say that they never happen. I'm sure that God does perform miracles when He wills to do so for reasons which are usually inscrutable to us. What I do know is this. We can always trust God. We should take all concerns to Him in prayer and He always answers our prayers in what He knows to be our best interests.

May 27th

Acts 28 vv 11-16

When, back in 1952, that 78 bus had to jump the widening gap as the bascules of Tower Bridge opened in front of it, at least one of the passengers was so traumatised that she was afraid to travel again by bus for some months. Eventually, she did pluck up the courage to get back on a bus and married the driver who saved her life! We're not surprised when people decline to get back in the air after a crash or on a boat after a shipwreck. We're familiar with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – the fact that someone who goes through terrible experiences may suffer lasting psychological damage. I think that we're now more understanding that it is not weakness or failure when people suffer in this way. On the other hand, thousands of people do survive terrible experiences and, while they may never be quite the same again, they are able to get on with their lives. Paul and his companions ship-wrecked on Malta had to get back on the boat and carry on to Rome. It's something of a mystery why different people are affected differently. What we do know, however, is that we must treat everybody with respect and sympathy, not judging them or comparing with what we think we'd do if we were in their shoes, but trying to understand and always being kind.

May 28th

Acts 28 vv 16-28

Paul continues to be well-treated by the Roman authorities. He makes contact with the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome and tries to explain himself to them. They haven't any information about Paul. So, wisely, they decide to hear for themselves what he has to say. Their meeting follows the usual pattern. Paul demonstrates that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. He preaches the Gospel to them. Some believe. Many do not. Paul reminds them that it is prophesied (Isaiah 6) that the people of God will not hear the voice of God's messenger. This fact opens up the mission to the Gentiles – to people of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues – as is God's eternal plan.

May 29th

Acts 28 vv 29&30

Paul enjoyed considerable freedom for two years. Then what? It is generally believed that he was martyred in 64AD at about the same time as Peter in the persecution instigated by the Emperor Nero. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul mentions his intention to travel to Spain. Did he perhaps do this after the end of Acts and before returning to his death in Rome? We don't know. It is sometimes thought that the reason we do not know the rest of the story is that Luke wrote Acts soon after the events described in chapter 28. Maybe he planned another volume in succession to the Gospel & The Acts of the Apostles. If he did, he must have written the Gospel considerably earlier than many scholars believe that all four gospels were written. They date the gospels after the fall of the Temple in 70AD, when the eyewitnesses of the gospel story were dying off and the facts needed to be preserved in writing. On the other hand, Bishop John Robinson contended that the whole of the New Testament must have been written before 70AD. Otherwise it would contain an account of the Temple's destruction. There are many things that we don't know. What we do know, however, is that the Bible is the Word of God to us.

1 Praise we now the word of grace;
may our hearts its truth embrace:
from its pages may we hear
Christ our teacher, speaking clear.

2 May the gospel of the Lord
everywhere be spread abroad,
that the world around may own
Christ as King, and Christ alone.

May 30th (Trinity Sunday)

Mark 12 vv 35-37

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

Now we have finished Acts, I thought we would look back in the Old Testament to the adventures of David. But, first, on this Trinity Sunday, the question which Jesus asked the scribes in Jerusalem. The expectation was that the Messiah would be a descendant of the great King David. Many of the OT prophecies apparently indicate this. Yet what we believe as Christians about Jesus is that He is much more than the son of David. He is the Son of God. He is a human being, born of Mary, the wife of Joseph, descendant of David. But He is also God the Son, One through Whom all things were made – including Mary & Joseph (and you & me). Given the grace of the Holy Spirit, we do see pointers in the OT to the reality of Jesus as Son of God and Son of Man and the truth that the one true God is eternally three persons in perfect unity. The Scripture Jesus is referring to is Psalm 110¹⁰, where David, author of the psalms, acknowledges the One Who is King and High Priest as his lord.

May 31st

I Samuel 16 vv 1-13

This is the first story about David in the Bible, but not the first mention of him. In the Book of Ruth (4¹⁷) we read that she was David's great-grandmother. Saul was the first true King of Israel. Only he wasn't. God is the King of Israel. The Israelites had, however, decided that they wanted to have a king like the Gentile nations who had kings. The people of God wanted to be like the people of the world. Well, they had been warned. God guided the prophet Samuel to Saul who began his reign very promisingly. But then things went very wrong. Saul lost his way. He became embittered and rejected both God and his human friends and counsellors. The result was that God told Samuel to choose a new king for Israel. God's choice was none of the young men whom Samuel thought would fit the bill. God does not see as man sees. God looks at the heart. Something to bear in mind when we are recruiting people to serve in any capacity in the Church. Are we too quick to adopt the recruitment practices of the world? (In the Bible, the words for gentiles and for the nations are the same words.)

June 1st

I Samuel 16 vv 14-23

Again, in the biblical languages, the same words are used for anointed, the Messiah and the Christ. In fact, Messiah and Christ are respectively the Hebrew and Greek for the Anointed One. Anointing a king or a priest signified the gift of God's Spirit for the task. Jesus receives the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove when He is baptised and acknowledged with the words *Thou art my beloved Son; this day have I begotten thee*, words used of the King of Israel in Psalm 2. God took away the spirit given to Saul at his anointing and bestowed it on David. Was Saul's grievous condition that followed then mental or spiritual? It could have been both. It is cruel and wrong to assume that mental illness is a consequence of the action of evil spirits. Mental illness requires kindness and medical treatment, not exorcism. I'm not going to explain away this difficult passage in those terms, however. In Saul's life there has been a vicious circle of rejection of God and man, of relying increasingly on himself and shutting himself off from grace. David's music does help to soothe him some of the time. Like Paul, David has many talents. In God's Providence, David is brought to the court.

June 2nd

I Samuel 17 vv 1-11

David evidently had returned to his home in Bethlehem by this time. The Philistines were sea peoples related to the Phoenicians who lived in Tyre and Sidon (modern Lebanon) and the people of Carthage in North Africa. They were civilised and great craftsmen and artists. They inhabited five cities on the Mediterranean coast of Palestine and sought to exercise their power over the whole land. The Israelites, of course, resisted. They were pagans who worshipped the fish god Dagon. They were more technologically advanced than the Israelites. War continued on and off between the Philistines and the Israelites for many years.

June 3rd

I Samuel 17 vv 12-19

Nowadays, the wars our troops are involved in are fought overseas. We've got used to the idea of air raids and long range artillery. You don't get too close to a battlefield. We forget that in earlier times, it was all much closer to home. People could come & go from the camp. There were sometimes crowds of spectators when there was a battle. We have to think and pray about the people in the world today whose homes have become battlefields and civilians have no choice but to be caught up in the danger and the fighting.

June 4th

I Samuel 17 vv 20-29

To some extent, one can sympathise with Eliab. David must have seemed, to say the least, presumptuous, reproaching mature men and seasoned soldiers for their failure to find a champion to fight Goliath and saying that he, a mere shepherd boy, would be prepared to do so. It turns out that David is not arrogant. He is relying on God. Another lad might have been arrogant, boasting in his own strength that he could defeat Goliath, not depending on God. Such a young man would very likely have come to grief. How do we judge ourselves whether we are arrogant in thinking that we have the power of ourselves to do some big thing or whether we are able to do whatever it is relying on God's strength? S Paul says (Romans 12³): *For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.*

June 5th

I Samuel 17 vv 30-37

David's offer to fight Goliath seemed preposterous. How could a youth defeat in battle an experienced soldier? David refers to the challenges he has previously faced and, in the strength of God, overcome. There are times when we feel undaunted and unable to deal with the problems which are coming our way. It is good to remember what we have achieved in the past. The God Who was with us then won't let us down now. Through many dangers, toils and snare I have already come; 'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.

June 6th (Trinity1)

I Samuel 17 38-47

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

David has two weapons. He is smarter than the Philistine in his choice of armaments. He relies on God. The two weapons go together. It is in working with God that we discover the means to live our lives fruitfully and to accomplish our purposes which will be His purposes too if we are His faithful servants.

June 7th

I Samuel 17 vv 48-54

Many churches, like ours, contain war memorials and other commemorations of those who have died for their country in battle. There may be regimental flags, laid up after years of military service, some bearing the marks of battle. Most Christians accept that sometimes war is unavoidable and we honour those, who like David, put their own lives in the line in order to fight for the right. No Christian, however, can be without compassion for the enemy or fail to be horrified by the deaths and injuries sustained on all sides of any conflict. We are subjects of the Prince of Peace and it peace that we pray for. There is a tradition that God Himself grieved for the Egyptians whom He drowned in the Red Sea in order to enable the Israelites to escape from slavery to them.

June 8th

I Samuel 17 v55 -18 v4

David becomes a favourite with Saul's family. Even Saul himself seems to alternate between love and hatred for the good-looking, highly talented, young soldier and musician. Saul's son Jonathan, the heir apparent, becomes very close to David. Giving David his robe is like when footballers exchange shirts. He is honouring David, equipping him as a member of the royal household and, I think, performing a male bonding ritual. This is all in God's plan which eventually lead to his becoming King of Israel and ultimately to great David's greater Son being born in Bethlehem, anointed with the Holy Spirit, dying on the Cross & rising on the third day to reign for ever as King of Kings & Lord of Lords.

June 9th

I Samuel 18 vv 5-9

David was a very young man when he was made a commander in Saul's army. It wasn't as unusual in the past, even the recent past, as it is today for young people to take on serious responsibilities. Richard the Lionheart led troops at the age of 18, the same age as Henry VIII when he became king. King Uzziah, at the end of whose 52 year reign Isaiah had his famous vision, came to the throne at the age of 16. On my bookshelf, I have an account of a 16 year old looking after a Thames sailing barge in a great storm in the 1940s. I sometimes wonder if we frustrate young people's potential by treating them as children too long?

June 10th

I Samuel 18 vv 10-16

Saul was very jealous of David for obvious reasons. He was young, good-looking, highly talented, a good soldier, popular with the people and a favourite with the royal family. It was also apparent that he had God on his side. Saul had forfeited God's support by rebelling against Him. He had become embittered against God and humanity. He was living in a vicious circle, a spiral of decline. The worse he behaved, the more he lost the trust and tried the love of the people around him. What Saul needed to do was to repent – to turn to God. Saul needed to acknowledge his faults and receive forgiveness. If he could do that, the circle would be broken; he could start again fresh. But it wasn't in Saul to do this. He just hit out at God and the people around him. They reacted by becoming distrustful of him, by losing their respect for the king, which, in turn, resulted in his feeling even more alone and therefore behaving worse. It's not a cycle we want to let ourselves get into and, if we can help people who are in that situation, it will be a difficult task, but we'll have done a lot of good if we can succeed at it.

June 11th (S Barnabas)

I Samuel 18 vv 17-30

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

In today's passage, God's manifold gifts – kingship, the institution of marriage, military prowess - are not used to God's honour & glory. David is promised Merab's hand in marriage. We're not told what Merab thought about this. David is then humiliated by Saul giving her to Adriel. We don't know what happened to Merab. It appears that (long after this) Michal brought up the sons Merab gave Adriel. They were hung by David when he was king. Saul promised David Michal in return for a victory over the Philistines, hoping that he, David, would die on the battlefield. So David killed 200 Philistines. Because he survived, he was allowed to marry Michal, who was very much in love with him, not what Saul planned at all. Even this marriage would not be a success in the long run as we shall see if we get as far as II Samuel 6. Everything we have – our time, our talents, our resources – are God's gifts to us. We'd better pray for grace to use them according to His Will.

June 12th

I Samuel 19 vv 1-7

We once had a discussion in Mothers' Union about whether we would tell the authorities if a friend or family member broke the law. I think we decided that it would depend on how close the friendship and how serious the breach of the law. Different people would draw the line in different places. Tax fiddle, benefit fraud, driving under the influence, minor assault, shop-lifting from a major supermarket, robbing a pensioner. I think the possible punishment might make a difference too. I don't think I could turn in a close relative even for murder if we still had the death penalty. Divided loyalties are very hard to cope with. In the Second World War, there must have been good Germans who loathed Hitler and all he stood for, but, as patriots, thought that they must fight for their country. Some Germans, however, chose to support a resistance movement and even attempted to assassinate the Fuhrer. In today's verses, Saul's family are divided in their loyalty to their father & king and their loyalty to David their friend, the good guy, the one who enjoys God's favour. So, how do we decide where our loyalties lie? There's a topic for prayer.

June 13th (Trinity 2)

I Samuel 19 vv 8-17

Saul's daughter Michal helped David to escape her father and king. We are taught in the Bible that loyalty to our wives takes precedence over our loyalty to our parents. Some marriages would be happier if people remembered that. Better still if there is no conflict with in laws, but we can't always have everything the way we would like it. The Bible also tells us to obey kings and all those in authority – though there are exceptions if our duty to God conflicts with our duty to the state. Duty to God trumps all other duties. In fact, we perform our duty to our families and to our country as part of our duty to God. So ultimately, these duties cannot conflict. *I could not love thee half so well if I loved not honour more.*

O LORD, who never failest to help and govern them who thou dost bring up in thy stedfast fear and love; Keep us, we beseech thee, under the protection of thy good providence, and make us to have a perpetual fear and love of thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

June 14th

I Samuel 19 vv 18-24

This is the second time that Saul is recorded as having prophesied. The first occasion was in those blessed days at the beginning when God had told Samuel to anoint Israel's first king and Saul, humble and even bashful at the time, had no idea that he was going to be chosen. Meeting a company of prophets on the way home from Samuel's house and joining in their prophesying was one of the signs God gave Saul to assure him that he was the Lord's anointed and the future captain of His people. By the time we get to today's reading, all this has turned sour. Saul is no longer humble, no longer obedient, no longer generous, no longer admired and respected. Being seized by the Spirit and forced to prophesy is now a humiliation. What was this prophesying? It was presumably the sort of thing we see in some charismatic churches where people speak in tongues, weep, sing, perhaps dance, become what observers might regard as frenzied. These two experiences of Saul demonstrate that such phenomena may be a blessing but that they are not always so. We are creatures of reason as well as emotion, brains as well as hearts. It isn't good if we allow either the brain or the heart totally to dominate. S Paul says: *I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.* That's I Corinthians 14 v15. It's worth reading the whole chapter if you want to know more about this subject.

June 15th

I Samuel 20 vv 1-23

Jonathan finds it hard to believe that Saul would kill David. He earnestly desires a reconciliation between his father and his friend. Divided loyalties are a terrible thing. I'm sure many of us can think of times when our families have disapproved of our friends or our friends have disliked our families or even of occasions of disunity within families. **BEHOLD**, *how good and joyful a thing it is : brethren, to dwell together in unity!* says the psalmist, and what a terrible thing it is when they don't. Jonathan wants David to prosper at court. He wants David to become king. So Jonathan promises to help David and the two of them swear an oath of mutual fealty. David will become king and he will look after Jonathan's family. If we compare these bible stories with the world as we experience it, we can learn its lessons both for our own conduct and for the prayers we might make on behalf of other people.

June 16th

I Samuel 20 vv 24-29

What was this new moon festival? Obviously, it was an important event, but, unlike the Sabbath and the Feasts of Passover, Weeks & Tabernacles and the Day of Atonement, there is nowhere in the Bible which tells the Israelites to hold this new moon festival or what to do when it came round. I don't know about you, but I pay attention to the phases of the moon. The moon is somehow special. We can't always see it here because of cloud, atmospheric pollution and too much artificial light. It must have been even more special in David's days. The moon and the stars are such more visible in the Holy Land even today than they are here. Nobody had walked on the moon when Saul was king. Does it seem to you more or less marvellous now that we understand the Science so much better than the biblical writers did? Pagans were so awestruck by the heavenly bodies that they worshipped them as gods. We worship God because He so wonderfully created the sun, the moon and the stars – and everything else which exists. In their way, the heavenly bodies – and all things – worship their Creator & proclaim His glory.

O ALL ye Works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever. O ye Angels of the Lord, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever. O ye Heavens, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever. O ye Waters that be above the firmament, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever. O all ye Powers of the Lord, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever. O ye Sun and Moon, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever. O ye Stars of heaven, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

June 17th

I Samuel 20 vv 30-34

As a member of Saul's staff, David ought to have been at the festival. Maybe he could have expected to be accused because of a good reason to spend the time with his family. However, Saul knows very well why David is not there. He gets so angry with Jonathan's advocacy on David's behalf that he throws a javelin at his own son. And yet Saul wants Jonathan to succeed him as King of Israel. Hardly consistent behaviour! Of course, the real King of Israel is God. He is King of Kings & Lord of Lords. Earthly rulers exercise their authority under God. Saul's priority for the succession should have been God's Will, not His Will. And so with every decision we take or action we perform.

June 18th

I Samuel 20 vv 35-42

The original plan was that, if Jonathan made the signal to tell David that Saul was planning to kill David, David would disappear quietly. In practice, they couldn't part without meeting and hugging. They ran the risk of getting caught and, in David's case, killed rather than miss out on meeting. This makes me think of people who have broken the COVID rules for various reasons. Some people have done so for weak reasons such as a desire to party. Some have done so for more serious reasons – to see a sick relative or to comfort one another at a funeral. There is no such thing as perfect safety and we'd lead pretty miserable lives if we attempted to attain it. On the other hand, we have to be responsible about risk, especially when we may be risking the health and lives of other people. Hopefully, by the time you read this, the COVID threat will be in retreat. We do need to pray for grace to make the right decisions ourselves and for those in authority whose decisions affect us all.

June 19th

I Samuel 21 vv 1-7

David really has to get away from Saul. He is accompanied by a group of men loyal to himself. They stop for provisions and supplies at Nob which must have been a holy place. Jesus refers to this incident (Mark 2) when the Pharisees complain about the apostles helping themselves to ripening corn on the Sabbath Day. *The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.* Rules exist to promote human flourishing, not to restrict or quench our potential for life. God's service is perfect freedom. If they treat it respectfully, David's men can eat the bread which has already been offered to God and is meant only to be consumed by the priests. I doubt if they were on the verge of perishing from hunger but fit young men on the trail were probably very hungry! The question has been raised, if you were trapped in a church and the only food available was the communion bread consecrated for home communion services (the Reserved Sacrament), should you eat it. I should say yes, provided you did so reverently & respectfully. Doeg will tell Saul about all this with the result that Saul will kill all the priests (except for Ahimelech's son Abiathar who will escape to join David). It is not always right to report every infraction to the authorities! What will best serve God's purposes of justice & mercy?

June 20th (Trinity 3)

I Samuel 21 vv 8-15

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

David was certainly in danger and adversity. King Saul wanted to kill him. He armed himself with Goliath's sword, which had been kept as a trophy of his victory in the sanctuary. Then he offered himself as a mercenary to the Philistines! That takes some thinking about. He needed to get away from Saul. The most likely way he could earn his living was as a soldier. But the Philistines were pagans & Israel's enemies. What would you have advised him to do? Anyway, the Philistines (for now) won't have him & David fears for his life. So he pretends to be mad. Mad people have often been treated very badly by their fellow human beings. Sufferers from mental illness very often do not receive the respect which is due to them even today. However, in some societies, there is an almost superstitious dread of the insane which protects them from being killed. So Achish lets David go as a mad person rather than killing him as an enemy combatant.

June 21st

I Samuel 22 vv 1-8

Plan B is to go into hiding in Israel. David is joined by all these distressed and dissatisfied folk and effectively becomes an outlaw. He sends his parents to Moab, another nation, for safe-keeping. David was, of course, of the tribe of Judah. Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin. The prophet Gad tells David to go to the lands of Judah where he'll be safer. Saul then appeals to his fellow tribesmen to help him to defeat David. He points out that he is more likely to hand out rewards to his fellow Benjamites than Judaeans David would be if he were King of Israel. How do rulers and governments secure our loyalty? In ancient Israel, God sent His prophets to anoint kings such as David and Saul. Others came to power in succession to their fathers as English monarchs have generally done. Some took the throne in military coups or otherwise by force. We elect a parliament which makes it possible for a man or a woman to form a government when formally asked to do so by the Queen. But what secures our loyalty? Respect for their position? The fact that we have elected them? A belief that God is the source of their authority? Heredity? Fear? What they offer to do for us?

June 22nd

I Samuel 22 vv 9-23

So Doeg did betray the priests at Nob. Saul ordered his men to kill the priests, but they refused. *I was only obeying orders* is not a defence in a war crimes trial. We remain individually responsible for our actions whatever the crowd is doing or whatever powerful people order us to do. Doeg, an Edomite, not an Israelite, had no scruples about murdering the Israelite priests. (The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob who was the father of the Israelites.) I'm uneasy (some might say paranoid) about the surveillance society. Apparently, we British are watched by more surveillance cameras than the citizens of any other nation on earth. Every so often, we're urged to report one another to the authorities for anything from pruning a preserved tree to planning a terrorist attack. Employers, doctors, landlords, teachers, even clergy are expected to check on the immigration status of the people they have to deal with. Banks query us if we make large cash withdrawals of our own money in case we are criminals. This year, we've had a national census in which we have been compelled to disclose our personal information to the authorities. Good reasons can be adduced for all this surveillance. After all, if we're innocent, what have we got to hide? But, apart from the fact that I might not want a bunch of civil servants and council officers prying into my private life (which I am guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights), giving the powerful all this personal information implies that we can always trust them. Saul shouldn't have been told about Ahimelech helping David. I've just been reading about Ann Frank and the Nazis should never have been informed about where she was hiding. Can we be confident that no British government would ever abuse its position in the same way as Saul, Hitler, Stalin or Mugabe?

June 23rd

I Samuel 23 vv 1-15

David couldn't bear to think that the Philistines were stealing the harvest from the town of Keilah. Perhaps he also wanted to enhance his reputation as a leader with the people of Israel. So he delivered Keilah, but the inhabitants remained loyal to the lawful king and decided to hand David over to Saul. But because the priest Abiathar had been forced to take refuge with David, David had a man with him who could discover from God what was going to happen and plan accordingly.

June 24th (Nativity of S John the Baptist)

I Samuel 23 vv 16-29

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

So David and his men find themselves hiding out in the countryside again. Jonathan, the king's son, comes to find him and pledge his support once again. The human beings in the story are making their own decisions and taking actions for which they are responsible, but, for all that, the story is working itself out in accordance with God's plan. That is how the world is run. We make our choices. We are responsible for what we do. But, in the words of the hymn, *God is working His purpose out*. So we can trust Him, no matter what mistakes we make, no matter what other people do to us. (John 16:33) *These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*

June 25th

I Samuel 24 vv 1-8

This episode is humiliating for Saul. Everything in Saul's world is collapsing around him. Much of it is his own fault. There are people who are still intensely loyal to him – like Abner, the head of his army. He is still King. If only he could humble himself and turn to God. If only he could accept God's Will for his own life and the nation, things might work out very differently for him. But he can't or won't return to God. Is this what Jesus calls the sin against the Holy Spirit? Where someone has so much rejected God that he cannot find any way back. Jacob's brother Esau sold his birthright and it says (Hebrews 12¹⁶): *Afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears*. I think God can bring us back from the brink, even people like Esau and Saul, but it would be wrong to presume. In their different ways, Judas and Peter both betrayed Jesus. Peter returned and was the rock on which Christ built His Church, but Judas went and hanged himself. The young men wanted to kill Saul. They probably thought it funny to cut a bit off his robe in those embarrassing circumstances, but, no. Saul must be respected. He is the Lord's Anointed.

June 26th

I Samuel 24 vv 9-22

It seems that there remains an affection, even a love between Saul and David. Saul even knows that David will succeed him as king. It is illogical for Saul to continue pursuing David, but he does. We human beings very often fail to act rationally. We need to be guided both by emotion and reason. Our emotions, as Christians, ought to derive from our love for God and God's love for us – our relationship with Him, developed in prayer, meditation, the Sacraments and Christian fellowship. Our reason, as Christians, is informed by the Wisdom of God, His Word, His Word written in the Bible, His Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, His Word speaking to our conscience and to our consciousness. David is adamant about not killing the king. We need stability. We need government. Bad government is almost always better than chaos and anarchy. We have a duty to respect authority even when authority is not very respectable. Only if we are quite sure that God's Law requires it may we break the laws of the land. Assassinations of heads of state are generally followed by chaos, by reprisals, civil wars, a succession of coups.

June 27th (Trinity 4)

I Samuel 25 vv 1-13

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

I don't think we ever read this story in church, which is a pity because it is a beautiful story. David is an outlaw in the land of Israel, but also the next rightful king. It would appear that he supports himself and his followers by enforcing a levy at least on men as rich as Nabal in return for providing them with security. Some people would describe this as a protection racket. Others would see it as a legitimate way for the future monarch to support himself. The collect describes God as our protector. He is ultimately the One Who protects us and surely the measures which we take to protect ourselves, our families and our interests have to be in accordance with his holy laws. Despite his wealth and power, Nabal isn't smart enough to understand the situation. Nabal actually means fool and it is probably not the name by which his

wife and servants addressed him. So he refused David's request and David was about to take violent action.

June 28th

I Samuel 25 vv 14-35

Nabal's wife Abigail was very much wiser than her husband and made a reasonable peace with David. How often women behind the scenes have ameliorated the folly of powerful men.

June 29th (S Peter)

I Samuel 25 vv 36-44

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

Peter was a very different kind of shepherd from Nabal. We do need to pray for our bishops and other pastors that they will preach God's Word & tend His flock in these testing times. Nabal was so angry that he had apoplexy and died. David married Abigail and Ahinoam. Polygamy seems to have been permitted in those days. Saul took David's first wife Michal and gave her to Phalti. We're not told what Michal thought about this. Women were in a relatively weak position in those days, though both Abigail & Michal used their initiative and helped David to achieve God's purposes for his life. They were far from without significance.

June 30th

I Samuel 26 vv 1-25

The basic story is the same as the incident in the cave in chapter 24. David has the opportunity to kill Saul. His followers urge him to do so. He refuses, but they play a prank on Saul. Saul and David are apparently reconciled, but the war between them continues. Zeruah must have been a formidable woman. Her three sons Joab, Abishai and Asahel were powerful supporters of David, but quite ruthless and unscrupulous. They were too much for David and responsible for more bloodshed than he would have countenanced. Even a leader like David is to some extent in the hands of the lieutenants on whom he depends to maintain his position. I can't really see why anyone would want to be the boss but those who do serve in that way certainly need our prayers.