

The Gospel according to St Matthew

Bible Notes
April – June 2024

April 1st (Easter Monday)

Acts 10 vv 34-48

This isn't an April fool, but I thought we should carry on with the Easter readings till tomorrow. *God is no respecter of persons* comes up several times in the Bible. God loves us as we are – not because we are good, not because we belong to a particular race or religion, not because we are smart, rich or important people. Unaccountably, God just loves as we are. Cornelius is a Roman centurion, a gentile, part of the army of the occupying power, yet he seeks God and he seeks to live a good life. God is ready to accept Cornelius, as He is ready to accept all who turn to him with faith & repentance.

Cornelius needs someone to tell him the Christian story and God sends Peter. To whom do you and I have the opportunity, the responsibility even, to tell the Christian story?

There is the story of all that Jesus did and said. There is the fact that rebellious humanity crucified Him, but thereby secured the redemption of the world. There is the fact that God raised Him from the dead and that there were many witnesses. The mission of Jesus is revealed in the Old Testament, as well as the New. It is God's eternal plan. This same Jesus will judge the quick and the dead. Jesus is Good News for people of all nations and kindreds and tongues who will accept Him. Baptism is open to all who come with faith & repentance. The Holy Spirit is God's free gift to all those who are willing to receive Him.

April 2nd (Easter Tuesday)

Ezekiel 37 vv 1-14

The situation is hopeless. Israel has been defeated. Her troops are dead. There is nothing left to live for. There may be times when we feel like that, that there is no hope. St Paul says: *But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.* He is talking about those who sleep in death. So how do Ezekiel and Paul know that there is a sure and certain hope? The answer is because they know God. It is the Word of God (Jesus), the Breath of God (the Spirit) Which brings life from death, eternal life in fact for all who believe in Him. Filled with the Holy Spirit we are inspired to serve Him on earth and then in heaven.

April 3rd

Matthew 1 vv 1-17

If you want to get a book published, you need an opening chapter which will intrigue and inspire the reader. Some people might feel that Matthew has failed in this respect and, indeed, these verses are seldom read out as a lesson in church and are a bit of a tongue twister when they are. But Matthew is putting the Gospel in context. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are God's eternal plan for the redemption of humanity and, indeed of all creation. The Old Testament was always meant to be fulfilled in the New. God's dealing with the people of Israel – the Law and the Prophets – was always a preparation for the coming of the One Who would be a light to lighten the gentiles as well as the glory of God's people Israel. So Matthew shows us how the ancestry of our Lord's adoptive father is part of the history of the great men of Israel. The four women mentioned as essential to the succession – Tamar, Rechab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah the Hittite – are all women who might, like Mary, have been the subject of gossip (cf v19).

April 4th

Matthew 1 vv 19-25

In our Christmas services, we seem to read much more often the story of the angel's visit to Mary to tell her that she had been chosen to be the Mother of the Son of God than we do this story of the angel being sent to Joseph in a dream to reassure him and to teach him something of the significance of this child, that He will save His people from their sins, that He is God with us.

We do often read Isaiah 7 at our carol services. *Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.* This is the prophecy referred to in Matthew with reference to the birth of Jesus. Some people point out that the Hebrew of Isaiah 7 merely describes the mother as *a young woman*, without specifying that she would necessarily be a virgin. The Greek and Latin say *virgin* quite definitely however and this is the understanding of the New Testament and the creeds of the Church. I'm confident that we should go with the traditional English translation of Isaiah 7¹⁴. If we don't, Isaiah's words are reduced to a commentary on an otherwise forgotten middle-eastern war, rather than revealing this most precious truth about who Jesus is.

April 5th

Matthew 2 vv 1-10

I know these words almost by heart in the King James Version of the Bible and I cannot help but feel that we have lost something in the multiplicity of translations which we now use, many of them lacking the power of the King James to move us emotionally. Maybe I'd think differently if I knew the newer translations better? What a wonderful story this is, however, and what a loss that so many people seems no longer to be familiar with it in any version. How can we share the bible story more widely, especially among children?

April 6th

Matthew 2 vv 11&12

Who were these mysterious magi or kings? We're not told. We're not told where they came from or returned to. The Bible itself does not state that there were three of them, nor the significance of the gifts – though the traditional understanding - that they reveal Jesus as King of Kings, God and His High Priest, the Suffering Servant Whose sufferings take away our transgressions – make sense.

Whoever they were, they were warned not to return to Herod. Herod's intention was to extinguish the Light.

April 7th (Easter 1)

Matthew 2 vv 13&14

Joseph too is warned of the need to protect the child from Herod.

The world is currently facing very many seemingly intractable problems and I keep thinking how we need wise people, teachers, prophets to show us the way. I pray that God will send us such guides. But would we listen to them? He did send us the wisest teacher and greatest prophet who ever could be. And did we listen?

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 alway serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

April 8th

Matthew 2 v15

Out of Egypt I have called my son.

Jesus fulfils the Old Testament. He fulfils the Law and the Prophets. The original reference (Hosea 11¹) is to the Exodus and refers to the whole people of Israel. God regards Israel as His son. He redeems Israel from slavery in Egypt, protects His people from the pursuing army of Pharaoh, brings them dry-shod through the Red Sea to the Holy Mountain and leads them through the desert for forty years to their home in the Promised Land. Jesus embodies the People of God. He is our salvation.

We are His Body, the Church. The Son of God descends from heaven and dwells among us. He sets us free from slavery to sin and the fear of death. He leads us and protects us. He teaches us the way of God. It is He Who brings us home to our eternal inheritance.

He is with us on this journey, we in Him & He in us. Romans 6: *Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*

April 9th

Matthew 2 vv 16-18

It hardly seems possible that anyone could be so evil as to decree the deaths of innocent children or that people could be found to carry out his orders. Yet it did happen and there are only too many instances in the world today of such barbaric cruelty whether in war zones or in the commission of terrible crimes. How can people be so wicked? Could I have been so wicked if I had been brought up in a different culture – a culture, say, in which it would have been considered a good opportunity to become one of King Herod's guards? Even good men, soldiers bravely fighting just wars, find themselves having to do things which they would never do in normal circumstances. There's a lot of material for prayer here. Certainly, there is a terrible conflict between good and evil. The victory has been won by Christ on the Cross, resisting not evil with evil, but overcoming evil with good. We pray for grace for ourselves to follow His example.

April 10th

Matthew 2 vv 19-23

He shall be called a Nazarene

Matthew is careful to demonstrate that our Lord's life and death and resurrection fulfil God's eternal plan revealed in the Old Testament – the Law and the Prophets. There is a difficulty here, however, in that nowhere in the Law and the Prophets does it say that the one who is to come will be a Nazarene. Various suggestions have been made, none of them satisfactory and a mystery this remains. It does explain, however, how Jesus came to be brought up in Nazareth, the place where Mary and Joseph evidently lived before they travelled to Bethlehem, where the Messiah was to be born, for the census.

April 11th

Matthew 3 v1

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea. Some people suggest that the last verse of the last chapter should read *Nazirite*, rather than *Nazarene*. In the Old Testament, provision is made for a man to take a Nazirite vow, usually for a fixed period of time. This a time specially dedicated to God – perhaps a bit like going on a retreat or spending time in a monastery. During the period of the vow, in that time specially set aside for God, the man would not shave or cut his hair and would abstain from wine or any other product of the grape. We only know the names of two Nazirites – Samson and John the Baptist – and they were Nazirites life long not just for a set period.

But Jesus was not a Nazirite. He certainly drank wine. His consecration to God was of a different sort from that John. So Matthew 2²³ certainly does not mean that Jesus was a Nazirite. We may be consecrated to God in different ways, but, if we are Christians, we ought to be no less than wholly consecrated to Him.

(Another suggestion is that, just as Nazareth was rather looked down on as a place, Jesus *was despised and we esteemed him not* [Isaiah 53³]. Another is that *Nazarene* might derive from a Hebrew word for branch, as in Isaiah 11¹: *And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots* – which foretells the coming of the Messiah. The name of the village *Nazareth* may be derived from the same word.)

April 12th

Matthew 3²

And saying, Repent ye for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
God is the God of Justice. Right will prevail. This is a wicked world, as we know only too well, but Judgment is coming. The righteous will be vindicated; the wicked will be punished. Psalm 98: *Let the floods clap their hands, and let the hills be joyful together before the Lord : for he cometh to judge the earth. With righteousness shall he judge the world : and the people with equity.* But, for unrepentant sinners, *the Day of the LORD is a day of darkness and not of light* (Amos 5²⁰). The Kingdom of God therefore is to be eagerly anticipated. The world is crying out for justice. But we need to examine ourselves. Whose side are we on? Are we perpetrators or victims of evil? We may well be both. Insofar as we are not wholeheartedly on the Lord's side, we need to repent – which means to turn to God, to turn away from sin, to have a complete change of heart and mind so that we seek to model our lives consistently on Jesus.

April 13th

Matthew 3 vv 3&4

Again, attention is drawn to the fact that the events Matthew is describing which happened in first century Judaea and Galilee have their place in God's eternal plan for the redemption of the totality of His Creation already partly revealed in the Old Testament. John lived rough in the desert. His clothing is reminiscent of that of the prophet Elijah, who himself is regarded as a herald of the coming Kingdom of God. John comes in the spirit & power of Elijah.

People query John's diet. Did he really eat locusts or does the text mean locust beans? He might well have eaten locusts. They are quite nourishing & plenty of people do eat locusts. Indeed there is a movement to get us all to eat insect protein in place of meat, insects having a much smaller carbon footprint than cows! Again, wild honey is perfectly edible, but it's not very plentiful and it has been suggested that, like many people in deserts, John fed himself to a large extent on a plant called Asphodel which has a similar name to honey in Greek. You have to be very careful eating Asphodel, however, as it contains poisons. Matthew doesn't say that John only ate locusts & honey, but it seems reasonable to suppose that they formed part of his diet.

April 14th (Easter 2)

Matthew 3 vv 5&6

John the Baptist attracted vast crowds. John Wesley preached to huge numbers of hearers, often in adverse conditions in the open air. Billy Graham's meetings were attended by tens of thousands and more. So why shall I be pleasantly surprised if there are more than a few dozen people in the Churches in Cuxton and Halling this Sunday? Admittedly, the two John's and Dr Graham are better preachers than I am. But there must be more to it than that. We had the evangelist Eric Delve to conduct a series of meetings at Margate when I lived down that way. An airman at RAF Manston asked me what an evangelist is. I told him that an evangelist is someone who says the same things that I do, but people believe him. Why should that be?

I guess that many of those in the crowds who flocked to hear the Baptist, John Wesley & Billy Graham were acutely aware of their need for God, which perhaps people in complacent, cynical contemporary England are not. On a more mundane level, I expect that when huge crowds are gathering, many more people go along too to find out what it is all about.

I am sure that, in each of these cases and in other similar instances of mass evangelism, there is a powerful work of the Holy Spirit going on, both to inspire the preacher and to prepare the hearts of the hearers. If we want to see our churches grow numerically, we need to pray. We have to be aware also, however, that very often preachers who have authentically proclaimed the Word of God have been largely ignored, even persecuted. What matters is that we remain faithful & trust God for the outcome.

ALMIGHTY God, who has 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.*

April 15th

Matthew 3 vv 7-12

How brave are you? Would you dare to rebuke a bad person, particularly someone in authority? Would you risk a friendship by pointing out a friend's failings? Would you imperil the unity of your Church by making a stand if you thought it was going seriously off the rails?

First of all, you would need to be sure you were right. We may just be arrogant if we judge other people, churches or other institutions. Humble prayer is a prerequisite to finding fault with other people. If we are sure we are right, the goal must be to preserve a unity of love. Seek to understand the other person's position. Don't attribute bad motives to them. Try to come to an agreement, but also try to remain friends if agreement is impossible. Be prepared to forgive and to ask for forgiveness. But, if all else fails, and the matter is really important, don't allow cowardice to prevent you from making the stand which is required of you.

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*

April 16th

Matthew 3 v8

Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance.

So what kind of people should we be if we want to be citizens of the Kingdom of God? St Luke records rather more of the Baptist's message, *He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise.* When, having conceived Jesus of the Holy Ghost, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is carrying John the Baptist, she sings the Magnificat, celebrating what God is doing through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus: *He hath showed strength with his arm : he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath*

exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away.

I once read a novel in which the principal protagonist was a fairly wealthy lady who had very little interest in religion but had sent her son to the choir school of a cathedral with a view to his getting a good education. Every so often, she felt she had to attend Evensong and heard the choristers sing beautifully these wonderful words. She wondered about those words regarding the rich being sent empty away. Just what does it mean to be rich? There is a view that everybody regards being rich as having more than he or she has actually got. In reality, I'm not rich like, say, a top professional, but neither am I hungry – not by a long chalk. So which category do people like me come into and where would I expect to be placed on the Day of Judgment?

April 17th

Matthew 3 vv 13-17

We tend to think of Baptism as the washing away of sin. It is then a puzzle to us why Jesus, the Sinless One, should need to be baptized. Jesus represents the people of God – Israel in the Old Testament, the Church in the New. God the Son, the Son of Mary, the Son of Man is in solidarity with the whole human race. *So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* It is God's Will that through Jesus the world should be saved. The Gospel is preached to the ends of the earth. The Good News is proclaimed. *As many as received him (and are receiving Him and will receive Him) to them gave (gives, will give) power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.* We do need to repent of our sins as we come to Him in faith. When we do so and are baptized in His Name, we are one with Him and He with us. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us and we are adopted as His children – the brothers & sisters of Jesus.

The sinless one to Jordan
came
To share our fallen
nature's blame;
God's righteousness he
thus fulfilled
And chose the path his
Father willed.

Dear Lord, let those
baptized from sin
Go forth with you, a
world to win,
And send the Holy
Spirit's power
To shield them in
temptation's hour.

On you shall all your
people feed
And know you are the
Bread indeed,
Who gives eternal life to
those
That with you died, and
with you rose.

April 18th

Matthew 4 v1

Then was Jesus led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. It is important that Jesus was tempted. For one thing, it is not a sin to be tempted. Jesus was tempted. Jesus was without sin. You and I may be tempted to sin, but it is only if we yield to that temptation that we actually sin. Because Jesus was tempted as we are, He understands us. He knows what we are going through. He knows from His own experience what challenges we face, what lies behind our prayers. He understands and is ready to forgive and to pick us up when we fall. Jesus lives a perfectly life, not because sin cannot touch the Son of God. *Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered.* Jesus didn't cheat, His divinity smoothing the way for His humanity. He really was *was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin* (Hebrews 5¹⁵).

April 19th

Matthew 4 vv 2-4

Jesus answers the devil's temptations by quoting Scripture. One of the most effective ways of overcoming temptation is to be familiar with the Bible – which is one of the reasons why we do these daily readings. The Word of God is infinitely more valuable even than bread, though God knows we need that too.

April 20th

Matthew 4 vv 5-7

Putting God to the test implies that we don't trust Him. God is with us in our daily lives. He is looking after us. We don't have to test Him. What we need to do is to trust Him – difficult as that sometimes is..

April 21st (Easter 3)

Matthew 4 vv 8-11

We may sometimes be tempted to think that there is a better way than God's way to achieve what we consider to be good objectives, but we are wrong if we do. Trust God & He will look after you.
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.*

April 22nd

Matthew 4 vv 12-16

The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death life is sprung up. Jesus is the Light of the World. So, in this dark world, why is it so hard to get people to come to the Light? Years ago, a young man in a pub one Saturday night told me about the many troubles he faced in his life. I suggested that he come to church. He agreed and, the next Sunday morning, set out for the service. When he arrived at the church building, he found he could not cross the threshold. Maybe the Church isn't sufficiently welcoming. He said that he was afraid that his mates would laugh at him if they saw him going into Church. Many people claim that the claims of Christianity are incredible. Some people are emphatically indifferent. Some can't be bothered. We can try to make Church more appealing and welcoming. We can debate doctrines and moral values which those outside the Church find hard to understand or regard as actually unacceptable. We can wish that our children were growing up in a culture which is more positive towards Christianity than ours now is. But, whatever we do, ultimately, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring people to the Light & the foundation of church growth must be prayer.

April 23rd (St George)

Matthew 4 vv 17-22

Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King?
Who will be His helpers, other lives to bring?
Who will leave the world's side?
Who will face the foe?
Who is on the Lord's side? Who for Him will go?
By Thy call of mercy, by Thy grace divine,
We are on the Lord's side—
Saviour, we are Thine!

Chosen to be soldiers, in an alien land,
Chosen, called, and faithful, for our Captain's band;
In the service royal, let us not grow cold,
Let us be right loyal, noble, true and bold.
Master, wilt Thou keep us, by Thy grace divine,
Always on the Lord's side—
Saviour, always Thine!

That's a great hymn and a great question. I hope we can all answer in the affirmative.

April 24th

Matthew 4 vv 23-25

George slew the dragon. William Beveridge (in his report on Social Insurance and Allied Services published in 1942) sought to slay the giants of want, ignorance, squalor, idleness and disease – noble Christian aims, worthy of the Kingdom of God. Jesus Himself brings Good News to the poor; He teaches the Way of Truth; He cleanses and forgives; He heals the sick; He calls people to live worthwhile lives. As members of His Body, the Church, we all have a part in working with Him in sharing His Blessings with the whole human race.

April 25th (S Mark)

Matthew 5 v1

His disciples came unto him.

What is a disciple? A pupil, an apprentice even. Jesus is the great Teacher, the greatest Teacher the human race has ever had. Christians must be disciples of Jesus, His apprentices or pupils, learning both from His example and His words recorded in the Bible. It is not just head learning. We are taught by His Holy Spirit Who dwells in us. So, when do we spend time with Jesus? Of course, He is with us all the time and we can speak with Him in prayer anytime, any place. But it is a very good thing to have time set aside each day for prayer and for reading the Bible.

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 26th

Matthew 5v2

And he opened his mouth and taught them..

V1 rather implies that Jesus went up the mountain to speak especially to His disciples – those who had already decided to follow Him. At the end of this Sermon on the Mount, the impression is that the crowds followed them and also listened in and that multitudes then followed Him. Of course, after the Children of Israel had escaped from Pharaoh and passed through the Red Sea, Moses received the Law from God on Mt Sinai and imparted it to the people of God. Jesus fulfils the Law revealed to Moses and teaches a fuller understanding of what it means to obey the Law summarised in the two love commandments.

April 27th

Matthew 5 vv 3-5

According to G K Chesterton, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” The Law as taught by Jesus requires an unconditional love on the part of His followers, both of God and of neighbour. The sacrifice of self is what alone makes it possible for every one of us to fulfil our human potential. Anything less than total submission to the Will of God for our lives is sin. Sin repented of can always be forgiven, but true repentance necessitates perfect submission to God and a willingness to seek His grace to *go and sin no more*. The teaching of Jesus goes far beyond conventional ideas about what is good, about right and wrong. Today’s three verses challenge human common sense. The ruthless inherit the earth. Those who mourn are to be pitied. The poor in spirit are downtrodden. But Jesus says, *Theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. Dean Alford wisely comments, “The kingdom must here be understood in its widest sense: as the combination of all rights of Christian citizenship in this world, and eternal blessedness in the next.” *Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance, and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him, which we do at this present; and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure, and holy; so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

April 28th (Easter 4)

Matthew 5 v6

Blessed are they that do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Do you hunger and thirst after righteousness? Have you been the victim of some burning injustice which you would very much like to see put right? Can you think of other people who are the victims of injustice? The wrongly convicted of crime? People caught up in wars for which they have no responsibility? People born into poverty or who have lost everything through no fault of their own? Do you long for all wrongs to be righted and, if so, what are you doing about it?

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.*

April 29th

Matthew 5 v7

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Mercy is one of the characteristics of God. If we want to be members of His holy people, citizens of Heaven, we must grow into His likeness. God is full of mercy. So must be His people. If we want to be forgiven, we must forgive. Mercy is inseparable from justice and truth. All three are aspects of love.

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love

All pray in their distress;
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love

Is God, our father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is Man, his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,

And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

The Divine Image, William Blake.

Yesterday, we thought about undeserved suffering and cried out for justice. But what about suffering which is partly or wholly deserved on account of the sufferer's wickedness or folly? Aren't they getting what they deserve? God is merciful. If we are God's people, we are merciful too. Just punishment may sometimes be unavoidable, but justice must always be tempered with mercy. One of the aims even of punishment is the restoration of the offender. Otherwise, we'd all have a terrifying eternity to look forward to.

O LORD God, who seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do; Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

May 1st (S Philip & S James)

Matthew 5 v8

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see;
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.

It is generally recognised that it is impossible to see God and live. He is so far beyond our comprehension. His holiness would consume us like fire. Only the pure in heart can see God. Only Jesus can see God as He is. Jesus makes God known. He makes God known to us and, as we come to know Him and to repent of the sin which divides us from Him, so our hearts are purified and so we may see Him and live eternally, not through our merit, but by His mercy.

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.*

May 2nd (S Athanasius)

Matthew 5 v9

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

The tune to which we usually sing yesterday's hymn and it was at the Council of Nicaea (318) that Athanasius was instrumental in helping the Church to understand and to put into words the truth that Jesus is in every respect wholly God and in every respect a complete human being. *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man.*

Sadly, these doctrines became the occasion for violent disagreement within the Church, for schism and even for persecution. The emperor Constantine favoured those who disagreed with Athanasius and Athanasius was forced into hiding for many years. He himself was not a particularly peaceful person, but he was right about the Creed. How can we both stand up for fundamental truths and be peacemakers? Pray for those facing this dilemma.

May 3rd

Matthew 5 vv 10-12

The Church tries very hard to be popular. We need the support of the local community. It is not much fun to be criticised or laughed at. It is, we think, obviously a good thing if large numbers of people join the Church. It is good for them, we suppose, and it is good for the Church. A vicar is judged to be a good vicar if he is well liked and has a full Church. But then we have these words of Jesus, a theme repeated time and again in the Bible. People very often don't want to hear what they need to hear, the Word of God. They (we?) want to be affirmed in the life style they have chosen, not challenged by God to be the wonderful people He made us to be. *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.* Warnings of judgment are disregarded and those who deliver them are ignored or actively persecuted. Crowds flock to preachers, political leaders, gurus, celebrity influencers, who tell them what they want to hear. It is marvellous to behold a Church packed with people worshipping God in spirit and in truth and effectively meeting the needs of its local community, but filling a church at the expense of the integrity of the Gospel neither glorifies God nor benefits His people.

That it may please thee to have mercy upon all men;

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

That it may please thee to forgive our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers, and to turn their hearts;

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

May 4th

Matthew 5 vv 13-16

I often quote these words both in preaching and in public prayer. Jesus is speaking to all His disciples here – not just to bishops and clergy. Those offices didn't exist until some decades after He uttered these words. It is the task of all Christians – all the baptised – to be Christ in the community. It is not just what we do in church or on church premises; it is not just what we do when taking part in activities organised by the Church; it is in everything we do that who we are ought to proclaim Who Jesus is and why the lives of our families and friends and neighbours, our work colleagues and the people we meet in the street would be transformed infinitely the better if only they followed Him. Colossians 3¹⁷: And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.

May 5th (Easter 5)

Matthew 5 vv 17-20

As good evangelical protestants, my mates & I in Christian Student Unions laid huge stress on the doctrine of Justification by Faith. Ephesians 2^{8&9}: *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.* There is nothing I can do to make God love me. He loves me just as I am without one plea save that thy blood was shed for me. I cannot earn my salvation. I am a sinner wholly dependent on God's mercy. The price of my ransom from sin, the world and the devil is infinitely beyond me to pay, yet Christ has wonderfully paid my price (and yours) and I am set free from bondage to sin and the fear of death. *Not the labour of my hands, Can fulfill Thy law's demands; Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow, All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

All that is absolutely true, wonderfully true, but what then of the Law? Does God's Law lead us into despair because we know that it is beyond us to fulfil its requirements? Are some people so sure that they are keeping God's Law that God somehow owes them something? Do some people who regard themselves as righteous under the Law despise other people whom they believe to be less virtuous? Do some people pervert the letter of the Law in order to achieve their own ends, while going against the spirit of the law, which is justice, mercy and love? S Paul says that the written Law is like a schoolmaster in that it teaches us right from wrong before we know Christ. Once we know Him, the Holy Spirit engraves God's perfect Law of love on our hearts.

Paul goes on in Ephesians 2¹⁰: *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.* We are set free from sin so that we should sin no more. We seek to keep the Law, not in order to obtain a reward or to avoid punishment; we seek to keep the Law which Christ fulfilled because, as members of His Body, it is our nature to do so. It is in this spirit, the Holy Spirit, that we pray to God, meditate on His Word in the Bible, meet with Him with others in His Name and participate in the Holy Sacrament.

May 6th

Matthew 5 vv 21 & 22

In a way, this is where the Sermon on the Mount gets difficult. How are we meant to apply the principles which Jesus enunciates in our daily lives? There are three ways of looking at this question.

Some Christians try to follow these precise precepts in their daily lives in contemporary Britain, but it is very hard to do. Sure, I wouldn't murder anyone. Probably, I wouldn't hit anyone. But not call them names or write them off as stupid, not get angry with them, is that reasonable? Is it even possible? After all, Jesus Himself had some very harsh words for the scribes and Pharisees, those who were trading in the Temple (whom He drove out) and those who caused offence to His little ones. Is it, I wonder, such a terrible thing to call someone a fool, because it is *the fool who saith in his heart, there is no God*. Am I not justified in being angry with people who perpetrate cruelty and injustice? Jesus is entitled to be angry. He Himself is without sin. Maybe I can be angry at the cruelty and injustice, but not with the perpetrators, who are, after all, fellow sinners with me? One has to be careful even with this, however. James 1²⁰: *For the wrath of man accomplisheth not the purposes of God*.

Another view is that it was possible to live by these naive precepts in the simpler time in which Jesus was bodily on earth. Our world, it could be argued, is much more complex, much more stressful, with very different challenges. We have to be nuanced in the way we apply our Lord's words to fishermen and farmers in our own much less straightforward way of life than theirs. But their lives were very far from easy, much less easy than ours. I don't think that excuse works.

A lot of people think that the Sermon on the Mount is about ideals. It sets a standard, but it was never meant to be a practical programme to be followed in the real world. Maybe, it is how things will be in some future of Kingdom of God. But what's the use of having principles you don't even try to follow.

I'm afraid that I believe that we should take our Lord's words literally and try to live here and now as the Sermon on the Mount says.

May 7th

Matthew 5 vv 23-25

YE that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are **in love and charity with your neighbours**, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God, meekly kneeling upon your knees. Some years ago a vicar hit the headlines by refusing to give Holy Communion to two women in his congregation who gave no sign whatever of being in love and charity with one another. Do we, in our churches, give sufficient weight to these words of Jesus and those of St Paul that we eat and drink our own damnation when we approach the Sacrament unworthily?

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*.

May 8th

Matthew 5 vv 26-32

We're just as sure that murder is wrong as people were in C1 Palestine, but what about sexual mores? C21 Britain is much less sure than people are in other parts of the world and people were in previous generations: that sex outside marriage is a sin, that lust is a vice, that marriage is a life-long relationship between a man and a woman, that one of the main reasons for marriage is procreation and that we should not divorce and that, if we do, we should not marry again. So how do we apply Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount today. Do we try to live by these precepts ourselves? Do we encourage other people to live by these precepts? Do we impose them on our fellow Christians as part of Church discipline? Do we advocate laws to enforce these rules? Or do we think that the world is so changed that these conventions and laws are no longer necessary? Do we think we should celebrate all the different ways in which people express their love for one another and rejoice to see the end of rules which kept apart some people who really loved one another and forced to stay together some who were in very unhappy relationships.? For myself, I still believe that we should take our Lord's words literally and try to live here and now as the Sermon on the Mount says.

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*.

May 9th (Ascension Day)

Matthew 5 vv 33-37

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

It so happens that these are the last words of the Ash Wednesday Gospel, about which I am thinking because I am preparing these notes on Shrove Tuesday. I rather think that at one time they were printed on the envelopes in which we put our free will offerings to the Church. *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* It's not just talking about money. What really matters to you? What do you live for? Is your heart at work, with your favourite football team, in your wealth or social status? Or is your heart in heaven? Do you view your life in the Light of Eternity – your love for your family, your commitment to your job, your friendships and pastimes, your enjoyment of God's world, your duty and your values? Do you regard all these temporal and mortal things in the Light of your immortal life in Christ? If you do, you don't need to swear oaths to the veracity of what you are saying. It is in your nature always to be truthful. Ordinarily respectable people keep their oaths. Christians keep their word. *Our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

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.*

May 10th

Matthew 5 vv 38-42

If your child is getting bullied at school, what do you say? Turn the other cheek? Hit him back – harder if you can? Get your retaliation in the first? The right answer is to tell him to tell the teacher or tell the teacher yourself. But what if he is in one of those schools where the school anti-bullying policy is honoured more in the breach than observance or if it's one of those schools will take reprisals on snitches? What do you advise? If he doesn't stand up for himself, his life may be made a misery and he may come to dread school and miss out on his educational opportunities. But if everybody retaliates for every injury, there's going to be an awful lot of injured people about. And what's true of the school playground is true of the wider world – whether it is criminal gangs on our streets or wars between nations. We certainly need to pray for wisdom.

May 11th

Matthew 5 vv 43-48

In the case of the school playground, we hope that the teachers exercise more power than the bullies and that they use that power wisely to protect all the children and, hopefully, to reclaim the bullies from the error of their ways. In the country at large, we rely on the forces of law and order to be more powerful than the forces of wrong-doing and disorder, to protect us all from crime and to see that criminals receive justice and, if possible, are reformed. On the international scale, we endeavour through organisations like the UN and treaties like the Geneva Conventions to prevent the powerful from abusing their positions of power, to protect the relatively weak and to limit armed conflict and its effects.

In order to prevent us from destroying one another we need law and order enforced by those in power, authorities which ultimately wield more power than the forces of disorder. Of course, we run a risk in entrusting fallible human beings with power. God is the ultimate authority. He wields absolute power. He is perfectly just, righteous and merciful.

St Paul speaks of the law as a schoolmaster. The law teaches us right from wrong. It encourages to keep on the right path by threatening punishment if we do wrong and offering rewards when we do right. Hopefully, however, in the end we grow up. We become good people. We no longer need the law with its admonitions. As good people, we act justly and rightly because it is our nature to do so. We become good people through our friendship with Jesus Christ. *A man is known by the company he keeps.*

God imposes and enforces the Law. He also invites us to put our trust in Him, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, to welcome the Holy Spirit into our hearts, to become like Him loving and blessing the good and the bad, overcoming evil with good.

I knew a man who didn't eat meat when his wife was watching him. He wasn't a vegetarian (though he thought that she thought he was?). A vegetarian doesn't eat meat when no-one is watching.

May 12th (Sunday after Ascension)

Matthew 6 vv 1-4

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

You may have seen footage of, even been to, big fund-raising events – dinners, concerts, auctions, whatever. A lot of wealthy people are invited along. They put on their best clothes. They are seen. Often the media are there. At some stage in the evening, guests are invited to contribute money to a good cause. Many do so publicly and generously. Maybe a rivalry develops such that people want to be seen to be giving more than others. Perhaps other people are motivated to give what they can afford, albeit much less than the celebrities and business people. The charities get a lot of good publicity and very large sums of money maybe accrued for very worthwhile causes. And yet? Isn't a point being missed? Might it not be better if, whether we are billionaires who can afford millions or poor widows who can only afford a couple of mites which make a farthing, we were to give as much as we can afford for no other motive than the love of God and our fellow human beings?

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.*

May 13th

Matthew 6 vv 5&6

When I'm in a good mood, as I cycle along, I sometimes find myself singing hymns or whistling hymn tunes. I have wondered whether this could be putting on a show of piety, contrary to what Jesus is teaching us here. I don't think that would be the case today. I don't think I'm showing off that I'm a Christian. It's certainly not the way to gain respect in C21 Britain. Sadly, I'm not sure that many people would recognise hymns anyway. If they do, however, perhaps it serves as an act of witness. Christians are joyful people.

[Once two club cyclists, who were exhausted on a long day out, so they told me, were cycling through Halling and received a great boost by being overtaken by a be-cassocked figure singing *Onward Christian Soldiers* heading towards Cuxton.]

May 14th

Matthew 6 vv 7&8

God knows what we need. We don't have to tell Him. He supplies our needs because He loves us. We don't have to keep asking. We don't have to shout. He doesn't hear better if lots of people pray rather than just one. We don't need to repeat ourselves in case He wasn't listening the first time or because He might forget what we've asked for. He's not more likely to grant us our prayer because we make an offering of money or of something else or because we undertake some religious exercise or promise to be a better person in the future. God just loves us as we are and supplies our needs for that reason alone.

So why pray? Prayer is an expression of faith. When we ask God for what we need, we are acknowledging to Him and to ourselves where all good things come from. We know Whom to thank for all the benefits we receive. We keep praying because prayer is one of the means by which we express our love for God and experience His love for ourselves. When we pray for other people it is an expression of our love for them. When our prayers are answered, as they always are, *as may be most expedient for us*, we know to Whom to give thanks. When many people pray for one person or in one cause, all those many people join in thanksgiving for God's answer to their prayer. We receive when we ask in accordance with His Will, we pray as two or three or more members of His Body, the Church, we pray as individuals. What is best for us is what He wills for us. We couldn't ask anything other than for God's Will to prevail. As we grow to know Him better (through prayer and all the means of grace) so our wills align themselves with His Will.

When we pray in accordance with God's Will, whether for healing, guidance, freedom from want, help in a difficult situation, for peace, for wisdom, for any good thing, we are working with God as part of His plan for His purposes to come to pass.

Philippians 4: ⁶ Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

May 15th

Matthew 6 vv 9-13

Most days, I say the Lord's Prayer several times. Indeed, it appears in some Church of England services more than once. The *vain repetition* forbidden by the verses we read yesterday? It depends on the spirit in which you say these sacred words. There is a depth of meaning in the words of the Lord's prayer infinitely greater than anything I have understood of it in what must be nearly seventy years of praying them. Admittedly, sometimes I can rattle them off hardly thinking about them. But that's still a lot better than not praying at all. God can use these words to bring us back to focussing on Him. We can say the Lord's Prayer when we cannot find it within ourselves to pray in any other way – knowing that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are interceding for us in heaven. The Lord's Prayer invites us to consider how we ought to be praying for what is going on in our world today. Sometimes I insert particular prayers for particular people and particular situations between the formal petitions of the Lord's Prayer: eg *Hallowed be thy Name* in the way we Christians behave ourselves in PCC & synods, *Thy Kingdom come* in Gaza and all those other places in the world where there is bloodshed, *Thy will be done* as Auntie Maud receives treatment for her illness, *Give us* and the homeless and the destitute *our daily bread* and teach us how we should share, *Deliver us from evil* as we read in the newspapers of the threats which confront the world. If we really pray the Lord's Prayer, it becomes apparent that, as the actual prayer of the Son of God, it is more special than all those other wonderful prayers with which we may be familiar.

May 16th

Matthew 6 vv 14&15

Forgiving people can be very hard, but Jesus is unequivocal. If we wish to be forgiven, we must forgive. But what does forgiveness mean? At its most basic level, it means that we don't take revenge. We turn the other cheek. At the next level, it means not bearing a grudge. That can be quite hard not to do. Not only is our manner changed towards the person who has wronged us if we bear a grudge, but bearing that grudge corrodes us from within. If the person apologises, we are bound to forgive and ought to treat him as if he had never hurt us in the first place. But what if you know that the person is weak and will re-offend, like the man who is sorry when he hits his wife but does it again & again? It would be right to take precautions, even if you could wholeheartedly forgive. Forgiveness is both difficult & mandatory.

May 17th

Matthew 6 vv 16-18

I'm writing these notes in Lent which began with the ashing ceremony on Ash Wednesday. These words of Jesus form part of the Gospel that day. So, are we starting Lent disobeying our Saviour. Some people think so and prefer not to take part in the ashing. If we do, the ashes are a reminder that we are mortal, a sign of penitence for our sin the wages of which is death, and they are administered in the sign of the cross which expiates our sin restores to us eternal life.

We would be going against what Jesus said if we were insincere in our repentance. So we would if our intention was to be seen by other people and impress them with our piety. If we sincerely repent of our sins, however, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God and wear the ashes as a witness to an unbelieving world, the ashing ceremony can be a legitimate step on our Christian journey.

May 18th

Matthew 6 vv 19-21

These verses comprise the rest of the Ash Wednesday Gospel. If we are in love and charity with our neighbour, it is obvious that we are generous in our sharing of the good gifts with which God has blessed us. but it is very much more than that. What is the focus of our lives? God or Mammon?

May 19th (Whitsunday)

Matthew 6 vv 22&23

The light which is in us. Jesus is the Light of the World. The Holy Spirit is that other Comforter Who has all the attributes of Jesus and the Father – three persons and one God, the God Who beings light out of darkness, order out of chaos, life out of death, freedom out of slavery to sin and purpose out of meaninglessness. Are you with Him or against Him? There is no middle way.

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.*

May 20th

Matthew 6 vv 24&25

You may have heard me using this analogy before. For some people, life is like a cake. It may be a very nice cake. It may be a nourishing cake. It is made up of family and friends, work, maintaining a home, feeding & clothing self and loved ones, holidays, hobbies & interests perhaps, politics possibly. Then, maybe, for some people, there is the icing. Icing on a cake is what religion is to their lives - something which is nice to have, but of lower priority than the *cares and riches and pleasures of this life*. Life isn't really like that, however. For some people, the marzipan and icing are the best bit of the cake, but they are not the whole cake. Worship and prayer are the best bit of life but they are not the whole of life. God permeates every facet of our existence, including family and friends, work, maintaining a home, feeding & clothing self and loved ones, holidays, hobbies & interests perhaps, politics possibly. Icing on a cake is an optional extra. We can't treat God as an optional extra. If we are Christians, He fills our lives and we acknowledge that all our mundane tasks as well as our worship and prayer depend on Him and how we carry them out depends on our relationship with Him. God does come first and determine the direction of our lives. He is our life and everything else we are is in the context of our being His children. Think of God more as the factor which turns raw ingredients such as flour, butter, fruit, nuts, fat, sugar, almond paste into a cake and binds them together rather than as an ingredient Himself or even as the cake.

New every morning is the love
our wakening and uprising
prove;
through sleep and darkness
safely brought,
restored to life and power and
thought.
New mercies, each returning
day,
hover around us while we pray;
new perils past, new sins
forgiven,
new thoughts of God, new
hopes of heaven.

If on our daily course our mind
be set to hallow all we find,
new treasures still, of countless
price,
God will provide for sacrifice.
The trivial round, the common
task,
will furnish all we need to ask,
room to deny ourselves, a road
to bring us daily nearer God.
Only, O Lord, in thy dear love
fit us for perfect rest above;
and help us, this and every
day,
to live more nearly as we pray.

May 21st

Matthew 6 vv 26-32

Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature
I'm sorry to have to confess that I am a worrier. I worry about small things and big things. I panic over trivia. Yet I really should know better. For one thing, worry changes nothing. It makes the worrier feel bad, true. Worrying is bad for your health. Worrying about worrying is even worse. Moreover, I know that, while I am not in control of my life and I hate the fact that I am not, God is in control of life and He is both all-powerful & all loving. So don't worry. *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you.* (James 4^{7&8}). I try to remember those words when the devil won't let me sleep at night for whatever reason – significant or just silly.

May 22nd

Matthew 6 v33

But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

That's the point isn't it? That's the only way to live a full life. Put God first and everything else follows. Forget about God, as our world seems to have done, and everything falls apart.

May 23rd

Matthew 6 v34

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.
I was taught this text as a child. I find it a great comfort, but what does it mean? Does it mean we ought not to provide for paying tomorrow's rent or purchasing tomorrow's food? Does it mean that we ought not to plan a wedding or study hard with a view to going to university or getting a good job? I don't think so. I think it means that we shouldn't obsess over such things or worry about them. It means that we should regard all our plans as provisional. Things might not work out as we intend, which doesn't matter so long as they work out as God intends. Trust God for your life. I think that is what this text means.

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

May 24th

Matthew 7 vv 1&2

These words of Jesus can be understood in so many ways. One way is to remember that, if we want God to be merciful towards us, we need to be merciful towards other people. If we get to Heaven, it will be because God loves us and forgives us our sin, not because we are (or think we are) more deserving of His love than other people.

Judging other people not only obstructs our route to Heaven but it also makes our time on earth less pleasant. Apart from the fact that, if we have a low opinion of other people, it makes it harder for us to have good relationships with them, if we judge other people, we are bound to suspect that they are judging us. If we think the less of someone because he or she is dressed unfashionably, has a funny voice or opinions we find objectionable, other people may be thinking similar things about us. Either we strive, almost certainly in vain, to be at the top of the pecking order, or we accept that other people higher up are pecking us just as we are pecking other people lower down the order. All very unsettling and magnified, like so many things, by social media. If, however, I realise that God is the only Judge Who matters, two things follow. I'm not unduly discombobulated by how other people judge me (or even how I judge myself) and I recognise that I have no right to judge other people. Only God has that right. St Paul says (I Corinthians 4): ³ *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self.*

⁴ *For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.* He also says (Romans 14⁴): *Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.* ¹⁰ *But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*

The vocation of those people who are professional judges, whether they know it or not, is to judge justly on behalf God, to establish justice, to deter wrong-doing and to restore the sinner.

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.

May 25th

Matthew 7 vv 3-5

The odd thing is that it is so much easier to see other people's faults than our own. For years I have blamed difficult people for the difficulties I have faced and it is only comparatively recently that I have received the grace to realise that I am a difficult person myself. Instead of finding fault with other people, we ought to examine ourselves in order to recognise our own failings. When we do so, however, the point is not to depress ourselves and certainly not to revel in feelings of guilt, but to confess what is wrong in our lives to God, knowing that He will forgive us, and to pray for grace to become better people. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* 1 St. John i. 8, 9.

May 26th (Trinity Sunday)

Matthew 7 v6

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, nor cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

So what is holy? Only God is holy, the Source of all holiness. Holy things are things dedicated to God. We Christians, frail and weak as we are, are a holy people because God has dedicated us to Himself. What is holy partakes of the nature of God. Holy people are called to be like Him, to be people of love, something we can only be through His dwelling in us and our dwelling in Him.

There is a distinction between what is holy and what is common or profane, a distinction which must be respected, but potentially, because nothing is excluded from the love of God, everything which is common or profane will be sanctified in the New Creation through the Blood of Christ. Colossians 1: ¹⁶ *For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:* ¹⁷ *And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.* ¹⁸ *And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.* ¹⁹ *For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell;* ²⁰ *And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.* (See next page for collect.)

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 the 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.*

May 27th

Matthew 7 vv 7-12

If we sincerely seek God, we shall find Him. If we come to Him, He will always open His heart to us. If we ask what is good for us, ie what God wants to give us, He will supply all our wants. It is better even than that, that we seek God. He seeks us. Indeed in Revelation, we read that He stands at the door and knocks. The father runs to meet the prodigal son. The shepherd searches for the lost sheep. God not only never turns us away, He reaches out to us.

I'm struck by how these verses lead up to the Golden Rule. *Therefore whatsoever things ye would that men should do to you, do ye so to them.* If we dwell in Him and He in us, we become like Him.

May 28th

Matthew 7 vv 13&14

We're not told what proportion of the human race will make it to heaven. Some Christians believe that, as it is God's Will that all should be saved (I Timothy 2⁴), we shall all get there in the end. Others point out that there is judgment (Matthew 25³¹⁻⁴⁶). We get what we deserve and so we should if God is just. Most Christians, however, very aware that none of us is good enough for heaven, point out that *it is by grace ye are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: Not of works* (Ephesians 2^{8&9}). But then why does God give faith to some, but not to others? But who are we to question God? We are clay in the Hands of the Potter (Romans 9²¹). What about those who never heard of Jesus or were perhaps put off Him by the wicked things Christians sometimes do (eg the abuse scandal, the inquisition)? It could be that they are judged according to their conscience (Romans 2¹³⁻¹⁵). Or do those who die without the knowledge of God meet Jesus in the hereafter (I Peter 3¹⁸⁻²²). These things are a mystery which we cannot understand and therefore cannot be told even by Jesus in the Bible. But our orders are clear: *Enter ye into the strait gate.*

May 29th

7 vv 15-20

By their fruits shall ye know them.

Thousands, it must actually be millions, of people claim to be speaking for God (which is what a prophet does, conveys God's message to individuals, to the Church, to the world at large.) There are pastors and preachers, bishops, priests and deacons, charismatic individuals, teachers in school & Sunday school, parents, even, on occasion. They claim and we recognise in them varying degrees of authority, but how do we know which ones are authentically speaking the Word of God. After all, there is much disagreement between the different branches of the Church and in the higher echelons of the different denominations.

Therefore whatsoever things ye would that men should do to you, do ye so to them. If we dwell in Him and He in us, we become like Him. Authentic preachers and teachers dwell in Christ and He in them. They (like all Christians) are members of the Body of Christ. It is their nature therefore to speak His Words. The process of transforming us into the likeness of Christ will not be complete until we get to heaven. So all preachers, teachers and prophets are capable of getting things wrong sometimes, but we can, by God's grace, recognise those who are sincerely following in the footsteps of Jesus with lives which produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We can prayerfully & rationally consider their words in the light of what has already been revealed of God – in the Bible, in the teaching of the Church, above all, in Christ. I think it may have come over as arrogant when I told the congregation that, if they found from reading their bibles that what I had said in morning service was in error, I would correct it at evening service, but I didn't mean it as a challenge! What I meant was that all Christians are responsible for seeking the truth and we all have access to the Bible read prayerfully and thoughtfully. I have had a theological education but that does not mean I am always right. God does sometimes use people who have no personal experience of the Truth to speak on His behalf. John 11: ⁴⁹ And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. ⁵¹ And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation;

May 30th

Matthew 7 vv 21-23

I am writing these notes on the feast day of S Matthias. Judas had betrayed Jesus. Instead of returning to God and asking forgiveness (which I am sure he would have received), he killed himself. After the Ascension, the apostles had to appoint someone to take his place, someone who could bear witness of all that Jesus had said and done from the Baptism of John onwards. Matthias was chosen.

Judas must have called Jesus *Lord*, heard His teaching and seen His miracles. He would have participated in the apostolic mission, going round the towns and villages, preaching the Gospel, healing the sick, and generally doing the things that Jesus would do. We can only imagine why Judas would eventually betray Him. His example does remind us, however, of the danger of merely appearing to be a follower of Christ. Do we truly love Him or are we just going through the motions?

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 always preserved from false Apostles, may be ordered and guided by faithful and true pastors; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

May 31st

Matthew 7 vv 24-27

When I was officiating chaplain to RAF Manston, we held a regular mother & toddlers' service. The chorus based on this hymn was always very popular and it was equally popular with our services for young children and their carers in this parish. The tune is easy. The actions are fun. The words are easy to remember, but do we realise how profound they are. For three chapters, Jesus has been telling us that to be a Christian is to adopt a lifestyle which is infinitely better than conventional goodness.

June 1st

Matthew 7 vv 28&29

Have you ever had the frustration of asking the advice of a lawyer? Why, you ask yourself as you tear out your hair, can't they give a straight answer to a straightforward question? Why does everything take so long? Why are they so negative, always advising you not to go ahead with what you want to do, or at least to delay while every other interested party is trying to dig up objections to proceeding?

To be fair to lawyers, the law is complex. They have to allow for the fact that some people in any transaction may be acting in bad faith or ignorance. They have to make provision for all the things, however unlikely, that could go wrong. They have to protect their clients even from themselves.

Jesus, however, is not like that. He speaks with the authority of God and His message is clear.

June 2nd (Trinity 1)

Matthew 8 vv 1-4

On 22nd June 1980, I was ordained deacon. The following year I was ordained priest. All baptised people are called to continue the ministry of Jesus. Ordained ministers are called to epitomise certain aspects of His ministry both on behalf of the whole Church and also to inspire, encourage and sustain all Christians in their own service to God. Traditionally, deacons were especially responsible for caring for the poor and for the sick. They had particular parts to play in public worship. They might be called to be preachers. Nowadays, most deacons go on to be ordained priest, receiving additional gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to take on further responsibilities. It is always the ministry of the Church, the ministry of Christ – one aspect of which we see in His care for the leper.

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.*

June 3rd

Matthew 8 vv 5-14

We think of the Gospel being offered to the Jew first and then to the Gentile, but here, right at the beginning of the story of our Lord's public ministry, He is approached by a Gentile & Jesus responds to his prayer by granting him the healing he desires for his servant. The centurion comes in faith, greater faith than Jesus has so far found in Israel. It is by faith that human beings are saved, not by ritual or birthright. This principle certainly ought not to make us Gentile Christians feel superior to the Jews. It is not for us to judge between people. Judgment is God's prerogative. Only He knows who truly love Him. All those who have faith (His gift) are His people – Jew and Gentile alike.

June 4th

Matthew 8 vv 14&15

When my sister and I were children, my mother had a bad back. The doctor told her to rest in bed. How could she, she asked, with two young children to look after? She just had to soldier on. This story about Peter's mother in law provokes a wry smile. When she is healed of her fever, she waits on Jesus and their other visitors and probably the family as well. She doesn't get to put her feet up. But we do live to serve in whatever capacity our calling. I've been thinking of that when I've asked God to cure the frustrating illness I have contracted recently. Yes, I want to be well for my own sake, but also so that I can perform the good works He has prepared for me to walk in. This story ought also to remind us that jobs like cleaning and preparing and serving food are not to be despised. We'd all be worse off if nobody did them.

June 5th

Matthew 8 vv 16&17

This episode inspired Henry Twells to write this beautiful evening hymn. What more can I say except that we have lost a treasury now we no longer hold evening services?

1 At even, ere the sun was set,
the sick, O Lord, around thee lay;
O in what divers pains they met!
O with what joy they went away!

2 Once more 'tis eventide,
and we oppressed with various ills draw near;
what if thy form we cannot see?
we know and feel that thou art here.

3 O Saviour Christ, our woes dispel;
for some are sick, and some are sad,
and some have never loved thee well,
and some have lost the love they had;

4 And some have found the world is vain,
yet from the world they break not free;
and some have friends who give them pain,
yet have not sought a friend in thee;

5 And none, O Lord, have perfect rest,
for none are wholly free from sin;

and they who fain would serve thee best
are conscious most of wrong within.

6 O Saviour Christ, thou too art man;
thou hast been troubled, tempted, tried;
thy kind but searching glance can scan
the very wounds that shame would hide.

7 Thy touch has still its ancient power;
no word from thee can fruitless fall:
Hear, in this solemn evening hour,
and in thy mercy heal us all.

June 6th

Matthew 8 vv 18-22

Mark tells us a little bit more about yesterday's story. The crowds gathered in the evening to hear Jesus and to be healed. In the morning, Jesus went out alone to pray. His disciples came and found Him and urged Him to return to Capernaum where there were still many people who wanted Him to take care of them. But He said that He must move on and preach elsewhere. Having been enthused by His Presence, who would now be prepared to leave home and follow Him? It is easy to say, *Master, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest*, but have we considered what it would really mean to do so? *I'll follow you, Lord, when my parents are dead and I have no more responsibilities at home... I'll have more time for you when I complete my degree... There will be plenty of opportunities for me to serve your Church when I retire, but, for now, I'm too busy with work.* Jesus demands wholehearted commitment.

June 7th

Matthew 8 vv 23-27

I got into a discussion once with an archdeacon about the high salaries which are paid to some church civil servants and lay officers. Her stance was that you needed to offer good money to attract good people. Did she mean morally good people or competent people? Would the Church be better off with morally good servants who are inefficient administrators, incompetent builders or mathematically challenged finance officers or people who are very good at the practical side of their jobs but are mainly motivated by money? I reminded her that the Son of Man had nowhere to lay His Head and that St Paul had learned to be content if he only had food and raiment. I rather rudely referred her to the commonly held belief that neither of those two would be offered a senior position in the present day Church of England. I hope this is unfair!

The disciples leave their homes. They trust Jesus sufficiently to follow Him into the boat and across to the other side of the lake where a new life awaits them as itinerant preachers in an environment which will sometimes be hostile. They entrust themselves to the boat with Jesus and shortly afterwards a great storm arises. He is asleep! They are terrified. He tells them not to be afraid & calms the storm and they realise something of Who He is.

You could argue that those people who are attracted to a career in the Church should stop relying on the security and comfort which a high salary, a watertight contract of employment and a comfortable home provide and simply follow Jesus wherever He leads them, relying on Him for the things we really need in life. I think, however, that I am at risk of hypocrisy. I'm much less well paid than some ecclesiastical civil servants, but I'm better paid than many people in this country. It would be very hard to remove me from post before retirement age. A nice house comes with my job. How many of us are really ready to abandon the security and comfort which contemporary western secular society affords in order to follow Jesus wherever He leads?

From all blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness,

Good Lord, deliver us.

June 8th

Matthew 8 vv 28-34

The issue of demons puzzles a lot of us. Some Christians over-emphasise the demonic. They are quick to blame demons for anything wrong with people and resort to exorcism as a remedy. Sometimes these attempted exorcisms are carried out in a manner which is terrifying and even cruel. On the other hand, there are many who take a "rationalist" stance and deny that demons exist at all. However, Jesus believed in demons. They are referred to in the Bible. It would be rash to deny their existence. If there are angels, why could there not be demons? It is a subject to approach warily. Don't jump to conclusions about possessions or hauntings or related subjects. There is almost certainly a better explanation. Don't fear demons or ghosts. The Holy Spirit is always stronger. Trust in Jesus. But don't act presumptuously. If you really think that there is a demonic or ghostly presence, you can pray, but don't attempt an exorcism. Consult a reputable clergyman who will put you in touch with a specialist if necessary.

June 9th (Trinity 2)

Matthew 9 vv 1-8

This is the guy who was lowered through the roof, though Matthew doesn't say so. Which was more important, that his sins were forgiven or that he was able to get up and walk?

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 10th

Matthew 9 vv 9-13

I can think of a place where a small number of good people maintained a little church. It served the community in various ways, but it was also a bit of a refuge for the congregation. It was in the middle of an estate where there was quite a lot of hardship, petty crime and anti-social behaviour. The congregation of the Church did their best to live by traditional values, family stability and hard work. These virtues were decreasingly present in the wider community. Would the people of the estate at large feel that the Church was for them? Would the existing Church members feel able to make them welcome?

June 11th (St Barnabas)

Matthew 9 vv 14&15

People of many religions practise fasting. It can be a sign of mourning and sorrow or of contrition for sin. It can be a way of overcoming the flesh and its desires. It can be an offering to God. Extreme fasting produces certain changes to the body chemistry which may lead to us having experiences which some would regard as spiritual perception and others would suspect of being illusions brought on by our abusing our biochemistry. Jesus' disciples didn't fast when He was with them in the flesh. Fasting was inappropriate in His Presence, but He says that they would fast when He was taken from them. This might mean that they would fast following His Crucifixion until the Day of Resurrection. His words are more generally taken to mean, I think, that Christians would on occasion (eg Lent) fast between His Ascension into Heaven and His Return on the Last Day to judge both the quick & the dead.

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.*

June 12th

Matthew 9 vv 16&17

Some people find change easier than others. Some of us welcome fresh beginnings and new opportunities – a new home, a new job, maybe even a new country. Some of us (like me) don't welcome change. We like the way things are and we don't relish the challenge of having to alter our way of life. I suspect that, if you are brought up in a faith, change in that aspect of the way you think is one of the hardest changes of all. People whom you love taught you to know God and probably taught you the familiar bible stories, as well, maybe, as hymns and prayers. You grew up accepting the teaching of your religion as authoritative and very likely you love not only God but the ways in which He has spoken to you – your local Church, the Bible in the version you've always read, the Lord's Prayer, the hymns you sang at home and school as well as church. For the convert, on the other hand, everything is change, everything is new. Jesus here is inviting faithful Jews to become Christians, which will involve both continuity and an entirely new perspective on life. Matthew 13⁵²: *therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.*

June 13th

Matthew 9 vv 18&19

Jesus drops whatever He was doing and attends to this man Jairus, who, as one would expect, was in great distress because his little daughter was on the point of death. We do need to organise our lives and we do need a certain amount of planning in our church programme. We must not, however, be too rigid. We need to be flexible enough to meet the current need whatever else we are doing. Thinking about the priest in the story of the Good Samaritan, I sometimes wonder what I would do if I was on the way to take a service and I witnessed an accident? I suppose it would depend both on what the service was and how serious the accident. There wouldn't be a choice if someone was bleeding to death & there was nobody else around. On the other hand, I wouldn't keep you all waiting if there was only bent metal and damaged paintwork to worry about.

June 14th

Matthew 9 vv 20-22

Another interruption Jesus responds to. Note the words *Thy faith hath made thee whole*. It's more than the cure of her physical malady. Faith makes us whole in body, mind and spirit.

1 Immortal Love for ever full,
for ever flowing free,
for ever shared, for ever whole,
a never-ebbing sea.
2 Our outward lips confess the
name
all other names above;
love only knoweth whence it
came
and comprehendeth love.
3 We may not climb the
heavenly steeps
to bring the Lord Christ down;
in vain we search the lowest
deeps,
for him no depths can drown:
4 But warm, sweet, tender,
even yet
a present help is he;

and faith has still its Olivet,
and love its Galilee.
5 The healing of his seamless
dress
is by our beds of pain;
we touch him in life's throng
and press,
and we are whole again.
6 Through him the first fond
prayers are said
our lips of childhood frame;
the last low whispers of our
dead
are burdened with his name.
7 Alone, O Love ineffable,
thy saving name is given;
to turn aside from thee is hell,
to walk with thee is heaven.

June 15th

Matthew 9 vv 23-26

If only. How we would like it if our dead loved ones could be returned to us, especially in the case of children who would have been expected to have so much before them. Jesus can do it. But He very, very rarely does. I suppose it is obvious that we cannot all live forever on earth. It would get very crowded. We wouldn't want to go on living on earth if age brought only pain, disability and dementia. But why do children and young adults die? I can't say I know. Maybe they are being spared some future pain on earth. Sometimes people die as a result of their only folly or sin, or that of others. Bereavement is always hard to bear, whatever the cause. Even if we don't feel sorrow, we may feel guilt or remorse. As Christians, we believe that those who have died in the Lord have gone to a better place. We should not be sorry as men without hope for them that sleep in Him. The focus of the C of E funeral service is on the resurrection to eternal life, the hope for the departed, the importance of our being prepared when our time comes.

ALMIGHTY God, with whom do live the spirits of them that depart hence in the Lord, and with whom the souls of the faithful, after they are delivered from the burden of the flesh, are in joy and felicity: We give thee hearty thanks, for that it hath pleased thee to deliver this our *brother* out of the miseries of this sinful world; beseeching thee, that it may please thee, of thy gracious goodness, shortly to accomplish the number of thine elect, and to hasten thy kingdom; that we, with all those that are departed in the true faith of thy holy Name, may have our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in thy eternal and everlasting glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

O MERCIFUL God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life; in whom whosoever believeth shall live, though he die; and whosoever liveth, and believeth in him, shall not die eternally; who also hath taught us, by his holy Apostle Saint Paul, not to be sorry, as men without hope, for them that sleep in him: We meekly beseech thee, O Father, to raise us from the death of sin unto the life of righteousness; that, when we shall depart this life, we may rest in him, as our hope is this our brother doth; and that, at the general Resurrection in the last day, we may be found acceptable in thy sight; and receive that blessing, which thy well-beloved Son shall then pronounce to all that love and fear thee, saying, Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world: Grant this, we beseech thee, O merciful Father, through Jesus Christ, our Mediator and Redeemer. *Amen.*

June 16th (Trinity 3)

Matthew 9 vv 27-31

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.*

It is God Who gives us the desire to pray. It is He who gives us the gift of faith so that, like these blind men, we come to Him and ask for what we need. Knowing whence all good things come, we know to Whom to be thankful.

June 17th

Matthew 9 vv 32-35

In a perfect world, there would be no pain, sickness, disease or disability. The world is imperfect because both humanity and Lucifer and his legions have rebelled against God. So it is understandable that the Bible sometimes, but not always, links disease with the demonic. That is not to say that the sufferer is especially wicked and deserves his troubles any more than the rest of us do. I have written above about the importance of not rushing to diagnoses of possession, which is very rare, and also of not getting involved with possibly dangerous rites which you don't understand. Jesus is more powerful than all the powers of the evil one. We don't have to be afraid, but we must not presume on our own capacity to deal with what is beyond our own strength.

June 18th

Matthew 9 vv 36-38

Christians constitute a priesthood of all believers. We are all bound to worship, to praise, to give thanks, to pray. Preaching the Gospel, teaching the faith and pastoral care are the shared responsibility of all the baptised. Bringing in God's Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace is the shared responsibility of the whole Church. Within this shared responsibility, however, God calls certain people to particular functions. Clergy lead worship, preach, teach and offer pastoral care. They prophesy. In so doing, they perform these functions themselves, they epitomise these functions and they lead the whole Church in the performance of these functions. So we pray God to raise up many to serve Him as ordained ministers within His Church.

June 19th

Matthew 10 vv 1-4

The apostles are commissioned to do what Jesus was doing. The one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, to which all we Christians belong, are commissioned to what He is doing in the world today. As we observed yesterday, certain individuals are called by name to particular functions, but we all have our part in the common task whoever we are.

ALMIGHTY God, the giver of all good gifts, who of thy divine providence hast appointed divers Orders in thy Church; Give thy grace, we humbly beseech thee, to all those who are to be called to any office and administration in the same; and so replenish them with the truth of thy doctrine, and endue them with innocence of life, that they may faithfully serve before thee, to the glory of thy great Name, and the benefit of thy holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

June 20th

Matthew 10 vv 5-10

Although, as we have seen already, Jesus was there for Gentiles such as the centurion with the sick servant, the Gospel had to be proclaimed to the Jew first and, only then, generally to the Gentiles. This was, by and large, the mission of Jesus and it was the mission in which the apostles were about to take on greater responsibility. Notice that they were too be too worried about looking after themselves. God would look after them. The people who received their message would look after them. When we believe that God is calling us as individuals or churches to any particular service, we should never doubt that He will supply the resources.

June 21st

Matthew 10 vv 11-15

The Church of England has traditionally aimed to have a church and a minister in every community. Some parishes have never shown much interest in going to church, but some of these have been in very poor places with great social need which the Church has attempted to supply. Some places have had strong well-supported churches with large and generous congregations. Others have been hard furrows to plough, faithful ministry being met with indifference or even hostility. Where should our bishops deploy our increasingly limited resources? Do we spread them out thinly everywhere? Do we concentrate on places where there is a positive response to the Gospel? Do we devote our resources to the places where there is most need, material and/or spiritual? Pray for God to guide those responsible for these decisions.

June 22nd

Matthew 10 v16

Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

Four different kinds of animal mentioned. The world is a dangerous place for Christians. Look what it did to Jesus. There may be persecution. Sinners don't like being shown up as what they are either by having their faults pointed out verbally or by their being shown up by the better behaviour of other people. Those who are trusting may well be cheated. Those who are generous may be exploited. Those who turn the other cheek may get smitten again. So be wise. Be realistic. But don't behave like the people of the world who despise meekness, integrity, generosity, kindness and a willingness to forgive.

June 23rd (Trinity 4)

Matthew 10 vv 18-20

Some Christians have quite literally been brought before kings and governors for Christ's sake – an awe-inspiring and terrifying experience for an ordinary guy like you or me. Any of us might have to defend what we believe in the face of ridicule or disbelief. We're not to be afraid. We're to trust God. He will support us. The Holy Spirit will enable us to answer. We can cooperate with Him by making sure that we are familiar with the Scriptures & always close to God in prayer.

Preachers and teachers are not to presume on this promise when they have a sermon or a lesson to prepare. God does inspire us, but He also expects to use our brains and the resources He provides.

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.*

June 24th (Nativity of St John the Baptist)

Matthew 10 v21

And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death.

To me, my faith and my family are the most important things in my life. It was my family who first taught me about Jesus. But what if these two powerful forces were pulling in opposite directions? How would one resolve such terrible conflict? That is one reason why believers are counselled only to marry believers. Another reason is that in a marriage between a believer and a non-believer it is only too often that the life style of the non-believer predominates, the believer gradually drops out of church life and the children are brought up without the knowledge of God. Sometimes, it can work the other way round. Someone who comes to faith after marriage shouldn't leave the unbelieving spouse, but, of course, we cannot stop him or her from leaving the Christian partner. St Paul says: (I Corinthians 7) ¹² *But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away.* ¹³ *And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him.* ¹⁴ *For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.* ¹⁵ *But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.* ¹⁶ *For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?* There are, however, places in the world today where violently anti-Christian people might denounce family members to the authorities in countries where conversion from the national religion is illegal. I was asked once by a person working in the chip shop – presumably an immigrant – whether it is against the law in this country to change your religion. First, we should be thankful for the religious freedom we enjoy. Secondly we should not abuse our freedom by becoming complacent in our faith. Thirdly we should pray for and do whatever else we can do for those who are in such a predicament.

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.*

June 25th

Matthew 10 vv 22-25

As Christians, we can expect to be treated as Jesus was treated. We are nevertheless on the winning side. The Kingdom is coming and will come even before we finish our task.

Psalm xcvi: **O SING** unto the Lord a new song : for he hath done marvellous things. With his own right hand, and with his holy arm : he hath gotten himself the victory. The Lord declared his salvation : his righteousness hath he openly showed in the sight of the heathen. He hath remembered his mercy and truth toward the house of Israel : and all the ends of the world have seen the salvation of our God. Show yourselves joyful unto the Lord, all ye lands : sing, rejoice, and give thanks. Praise the Lord upon the harp : sing to the harp with a psalm of thanksgiving. With trumpets also and shawms : O shew yourselves joyful before the Lord the King. Let the sea make a noise, and all that therein is : the round world, and that dwell therein. Let the floods clap their hands, and let the hills be joyful together before the Lord : for he cometh to judge the earth. With righteousness shall he judge the world : and the peoples with equity.

June 26th

Matthew 10 vv 26&27

The truth does come out, despite the best efforts of powerful people to conceal their misdeeds. There are government and political cover ups. Public bodies (eg NHS trusts and Social Services departments, the Church even) cite personal confidentiality as an excuse not to divulge details of cases where they have messed up the lives of vulnerable people. Businesses abuse commercial confidentiality as a shield to protect them against members of the public probing their incompetence and corruption. But God always knows the truth. He is a just judge, the just Judge. Very often too, the truth comes out here on earth and quite often the consequences of the cover up are worse for the institution or the individual than a straightforward admission of guilt or incompetence would have been.

What we have learned from Jesus, we do proclaim from the housetops.

June 27th

Matthew 10 v28

Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell.

Who *is able to destroy both body and soul in hell*? Strangely, there are two answers to this question – God and the devil. But the devil cannot act unless God permits him to. So, if we have faith in God, we don't have to fear the devil. But why should we fear that God might *destroy both body and soul in hell*? We know that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Isn't it then infinitely more foolish to fear our persecutors than it is to fear God, to deny our faith in the face of the threat of martyrdom. Jesus said, (Mark 9): ³⁸ *Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*

June 28th

Matthew 10 vv 29-33

The obvious lesson from these words of Jesus is that we can trust God to look after us. Whether we die a martyr's death or live a peaceful, prosperous life, we are in God's Hands. He loves us. He knows what is best for us. He has prepared particular good works for each of us to walk in. We each have our own vocation.

Ye saints, who toil below,
adore your heavenly King,
and onward as ye go
some joyful anthem sing;
take what he gives
and praise him still,
through good and ill,
who ever lives.

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

I also derive the lesson that God cares for sparrows and, therefore, all living things, not just those made in His image. I take this as a warrant for praying for sick pets, as a warning against cruelty to animals and a reason for us to be good stewards of the natural environment, taking care of the plants and animals which God has entrusted to our care. Psalm 115: ¹⁵ *Ye are the blessed of the Lord : who made heaven and earth.* ¹⁶ *All the whole heavens are the Lord's : the earth hath he given to the children of men.* So we are responsible for the earth.

June 29th (S Peter)

Matthew 10 vv 34-39

Jesus is the Prince of Peace. So why did He say such troubling things about creating division and strife? Well, we have to choose. Given the opportunity to choose to pursue the paths of peace, what is our choice? We can decide to follow Jesus or we may not decide to follow Jesus. There is no third way. There is no compromise. There is no indifference or impartiality. We are either for Him or against Him. Once we know Jesus we either accept His love or we don't. If we are not working with Him, we are working against Him. So there will be conflict, but we must never adopt the weapons of the other side, even though not to do so might result in our losing our own lives as the only way to find them. *Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.*

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.*

June 30th (Trinity 5)

Matthew 10 vv 40-42

The way we regard Jesus is the way we regard God. Do we love Him & serve Him? The Son is one with the Father. You cannot have one without the other. The way we treat Jesus is the way we treat God. Jesus is also one with the Church. She is His Body. She is His Bride. Just as a man and his wife are one flesh, so we are one with Christ. We are one with Him as the Church. We are one with Him as individuals. We are one with one another. The way Christians are treated, the way people treat the Church therefore is the way Christ is treated and therefore the way people are treating God. I'd go further and say that what is true of the Church in this respect is true also of all human beings. The Word was made flesh. He wasn't made a Christian. He is *God, of the Substance of the Father begotten before the worlds: and Man (not church member!) of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world.* It follows that we should respect everyone as we respect everyone's Creator and Redeemer.

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