

St Paul's
Second Epistle to
the Corinthians

Bible Notes January -
March 2023

1st January (Circumcision of Christ)

II Corinthians 1 v1

I used to find II Corinthians a very difficult epistle to understand. So I was surprised when the vicar of the Church I then attended said that it was one of his favourite books of the Bible. After he had said this, I had another think about II Corinthians. He is right. It is a wonderful epistle. Paul, the apostle, by the will of God, addresses the Church at Corinth and in the surrounding territory (Achaia). What does he have to say to us here and now as we commence a new calendar year? I'm sure that today's collect reflects Paul's teaching faithfully. Christ fulfilled all the demands of the Law. Our membership of the Church, our eternal life, is God's free gift to us. Our part is to reciprocate His Love and, by His grace, to live the life of the Holy Spirit, rather than walking in the ways of sin, the world and the devil.

ALMIGHTY God, who madest thy blessed Son to be circumcised, and obedient to the law for man; Grant us the true Circumcision of the Spirit; that, our hearts, and all our members, being mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts, we may in all things obey thy blessed will; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

2nd January

II Corinthians 1v2

When the Bishop of Rochester asked me when I could start as Rector of Cuxton and Halling, I said, "Any day after New Year's Day." So this is the 36th anniversary of my institution and induction into the parish. *Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, says Paul.* Grace and peace – God's gifts to His church, God's gifts to the world, of which Christian ministers are conduits. We are ministers of the Sacraments and of the Word. We are pastors, teachers and preachers. We are priests in the New Testament sense of the word. I'm only too aware of my own shortcomings, as Paul was aware of his. It is only by God's grace that we achieve anything. In the New Testament sense of the word *priest*, Jesus is the high priest and all Christians constitute a royal priesthood. You, as well as I, participate in and share the Sacraments. You, together with us clergy, proclaim the Word of God in what you say, what you do & what you are. You teach the faith & preach by word and example. We all share in caring for one another pastorally both in the Church & in the world outside.

March 30th

II Corinthians 13 vv 1-10

Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the Son of God, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. All things were made by Him & for Him. He is the first fruits of the Resurrection. By Him all things consist. He is the image of God, the firstborn of every creature. He is the Head of the Church.

And where do we see written clearly and for all to see the words *Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews*? They are, of course, written in three languages, the superscription on the Cross.

This is the paradox of power, the reality of true authority.

Jesus is the standard by Whom we measure ourselves. He is the standard by which the Church is judged.

March 31st

II Corinthians 13 vv 11-14

Paul's hope and prayer for the Church is that she will live up to the standard of Christ: that we should love God with all hearts and trust in Him; that we should love one another as Christ loves us and keep His commandments; that we should find our strength and peace in our fellowship with one another and with God.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.

March 28th

II Corinthians 12 vv 14-19

I seek not yours but you.

The role of a minister is not to grow rich at the expense of his congregation, nor to acquire status either in the eyes of the world or in the eyes of his fellow Christian. Ministry is not about building a reputation. Christian ministry is about serving the people of God. It involves preaching the Gospel and teaching the faith, celebrating the Sacraments of Baptism & Holy Communion, offering pastoral care, providing leadership. The minister's role is to support every Christian in his or her life in faith. It is the role of every Christian to support one another as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ our Lord.

March 29th

II Corinthians 12 vv 20&21

When I was growing up, there was a great deal of talk in the Church about getting back to the New Testament. The New Testament Church didn't own and maintain expensive buildings. Its clergy weren't mighty prelates or even gentry. Many of the early Christians were slaves. Sinners were welcome, no matter how vile. Missionary work was conducted vigorously and without fear or favour. Money and possessions were shared. Christians attended to the apostles' teaching, prayed together and broke bread together. Even the pagans commented on how these Christians loved one another. There were miracles of healing. Christians not only didn't flinch from martyrdom; some of them even welcomed the opportunity to die for the One Who had died for us all. So what had gone wrong and how could we get back to those days? Some people thought that it was the conversion of Constantine and the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire that brought Christianity down to a more worldly level. Some went back further than that. The early Christians had been despised outcasts from society and the Church flourished. As time went on and the majority of people claimed to be Christians, Christianity became conventional, respectable and worldly. Far from being despised for being a Christian, if you wanted to get on in the world you needed at least to pretend to be a Christian. But today's verses show that even the early Church wasn't perfect. The Church is both a human institution and a Body founded on Christ. That tension is always there. We seek God's grace that our churches may be more Christlike & less worldly.

3rd January

II Corinthians 1 vv 3&4

As we shall see, Paul endured many tribulations. Perhaps you do too. Maybe you have anxieties about your family or your financial situation. Perhaps you are unwell in mind or body. You might fear being overwhelmed by circumstances. There are many challenges to face in the world today, both in this country and overseas. One thing we can all do is to pray. We used to sing this chorus:
A little talk with Jesus makes it right, all right;
A little talk with Jesus makes it right, all right;
In trials of ev'ry kind, praise God, I always find
That a little talk with Jesus makes it right, all right.

It would be a mistake to assume that, if you only pray, God will give you what you want, that He will magic away the difficulties you have to face. Given that God is infinitely wiser and infinitely more loving than we are, it makes much more sense to pray for what God wants than for what we want. What He wants is infinitely better than anything we can even conceive of. Just talk to God about your troubles. He is your Father & mine. What we find is that He comforts us in our tribulations, giving us the strength to face whatever it is that we have to face and, yes, sometimes making our problems go away altogether. That being so in our experience, we can comfort other people as we support them in bearing the burdens they carry – by offering practical help where appropriate, in prayer (with them if they are open to the idea, but certainly for them), and just by being there.

4th January

II Corinthians 1 vv 5&6

To be honest, I have never, not since my teenage years, much liked the Hymn *Father Hear the Prayer We Offer*.

Father, hear the prayer we
offer:
Not for ease that prayer shall
be,
But for strength, that we may
ever
Live our lives courageously.

pathway
May we tread rejoicingly.

Not forever by still waters
Would we idly rest and stay;
But would smite the living
fountains
From the rocks along our way.

Not for ever in green pastures
Do we ask our way to be;
But the steep and rugged

Be our strength in hours of
weakness,

In our wanderings be our
Guide;
Through endeavour, failure,

danger,
Saviour, be thou at our side.

I've printed it out. Maybe you appreciate its meaning more than I do. I have two problems with the hymn. My over literal mind is uncomfortable with what seems to be a contradiction of Psalm 23, *The Lord's My Shepherd*. My other problem with it is that I am not very adventurous or courageous. My prayer would be more like, "Lord, if Your will requires me to leave the green pastures and still waters, please give me the grace to do so wholeheartedly, but, if I can serve You without climbing any steep and rugged pathways or smiting fountains from the rocks, I'd be really grateful." I suspect that St Paul would be closer to LM Willis (who wrote the hymn) than I am. Paul was adventurous and courageous. He did strike out boldly. He felt blessed to suffer for the faith. The more he endures, the more he experiences Christ's power to comfort him, his character is honed by his experiences, he becomes more effective in comforting others. Perhaps I should think again about this hymn.

5th January

II Corinthians 1 vv 7-10

I was recently at a meeting where the subject came up of Christians being persecuted for their faith. There are many instances of martyrdom in the Bible and in the history of the Church when Christians have been prepared to endure mockery, deprivation, rejection by their families & friends, joblessness, imprisonment, torture and even death, rather than let Jesus down. At least one of those present was surprised to be told that all this is still going on in much of the world today. It was true in St Paul's time and it is true today. A century and a half or so after Paul, Tertullian claimed that *The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church*. He meant that, the more the Church was persecuted, the more she grew. Christians were strengthened by their experience of Jesus bearing them through their sufferings. Non-believers were converted because they realised how special Jesus is that people were prepared to die for Him. There is the awful thought that maybe the Church is so weak in the twenty-first century West because we have it too easy! Pray for the persecuted. Pray for the persecutors. Pray for ourselves.

March 26th (Lent 5 Passion Sunday)

II Corinthians 12 vv 7-10

Like Paul, we sometimes pray over a long period that some annoying affliction will be taken away from us. God doesn't take it away and we wonder why. Is it because we lack faith? Doesn't God care about us sufficiently? Paul had plenty of faith & he knew that God loved him. He saw that there was a reason why this thorn in the flesh (whatever it was) wasn't taken away from him. God's grace is sufficient for us. Our strength is made perfect in weakness. We just have to trust in God for our lives, something we might forget when everything is going smoothly. We take up our cross daily & follow a crucified Saviour. We can't always expect the Way of the Cross to be easy going. It wouldn't be good for us if it were.

WE beseech thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon thy people; that by thy great goodness they may be governed and preserved evermore, both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

March 27th

II Corinthians 12 vv 11-13

A long time ago, a woman I knew served a term on Gillingham Council. The pavements alongside the roads where she lived were in a very poor condition. She'd tried several times over a long period to get them fixed, but to no avail. At last, she played her trump card. "I'm a councillor," she told the head of the highways department. A couple of men then turned up and started work. The lady in question was pleased that at last something was being done, but she also felt a bit guilty. The council should respond to requests for work to be done on the basis of need. Councillors and council officers shouldn't be privileged when it comes to the allocation of council resources or the enforcement of regulations. All citizens ought to be treated equally and ought to be able to expect the best service the council can provide. But her *I'm a councillor* did get the job done – or at least started. Before it was finished, the men went off and fixed the pavements in the road where the mayor lived! Paul here is ashamed of boasting, but he felt that it was the only way to get the job done. He had to show the Corinthians that he was as good as (actually better than) these false apostles who seemed so impressive. The only way to do so was to boast of the great gifts that God had given him and to talk about what he himself, by God's grace, had achieved, but it quite rightly made him uncomfortable.

he had intended; telling Paul to hang on in there in Corinth in the face of opposition; and comforting him when he was a prisoner in Jerusalem. Paul also spoke with tongues and there may well have been other spiritual experiences. So we can't be sure what vision this was. But Paul doesn't boast about his wonderful spiritual experiences. He boasts, if he boasts at all, about his infirmities. Paul is awed that God makes Himself known to him.

Today – nine months before Christmas – we remember the Archangel Gabriel appearing to Mary and promising her that she would become the Mother of the Son of God. Awe, humility and the readiness to serve.

MY soul doth magnify the Lord : and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded : the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold, from henceforth : all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me : and holy is his Name. And his mercy is on them that fear him : throughout all generations. He hath showed strength with his arm : he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away. He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel : as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed, for ever. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

WE beseech thee, O Lord, pour thy grace into our hearts; that, as we have known the incarnation of thy Son Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by his cross and passion we may be brought unto the glory of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

6th January (Epiphany)

II Corinthians 1 v11

The Feast of the Epiphany is sometimes known as the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. God had prepared the way for Jesus (Who came because God loves the whole world) by manifesting Himself to Israel in the Law and the Prophets (as well as to the whole of humanity through the wonders of creation, the gift of conscience, etc.) The first Gentiles to meet God in the flesh, so to speak, were the wise men.

After His Resurrection, Christ commissioned His Church to share the Gospel message with the whole world. Paul's mission to Corinth and to many other cities around the Mediterranean Sea was a very significant aspect of that process getting under way. There were persecutions and all kinds of difficulties but they were sustained by the fellowship of the Holy Spirit expressed in prayer for one another. I like what Paul says in this verse about supporting one another in prayer meaning that we can all share in giving thanks for God's answer to the Church's prayers. It's not that, the more people pray, the more likely God is to hear and to act. God's acts are acts of grace. Our prayers are our aligning our wills with His Will. As our prayers are answered by God's grace, we have the grace to give thanks – the more the merrier.

O GOD, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant, that we, which know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

January 7th

II Corinthians 1 v12

Not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God.

Ministers of religion are often educated people. St Paul certainly was. Generally speaking (although God of course is sovereign and can call anyone to serve Him in any capacity), it is a good thing that they are. They need to know the Bible, to understand and interpret God's Word, to proclaim the Word and to know how to deal with the issues that arise for Christians in their personal lives and in churches. However, neither ministers nor churches must ever forget that we don't minister by our own cleverness or erudition, the professional qualifications which might impress, but by the grace of God.

January 8th (Epiphany 1)

II Corinthians 1 v13

In the 1662 prayerbook, today we remember the occasion when Mary & Joseph took the 12 year old Jesus to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem and had to go back to Jerusalem when they discovered that He was not with them on the return journey, only to find Him in the Temple talking with the scholars. *Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?* was His reply when they questioned why He had worried them so badly. In the Common Worship lectionary today, we remember our Lord's Baptism, when God the Father acknowledges Him as His Son and the Holy Spirit descends upon Him in the form of a dove.

Paul relies on the fact that the Corinthian congregation recognises and acknowledges his letters as authentic and authoritative. It seems that other people sometimes wrote letters to the churches claiming to be from Paul when they weren't. Paul also had to enforce discipline and to insist that certain doctrines were true and others false, when doing so made him unpopular and led people to question his right to tell them what to do. The Church of God (and individual local churches) is the spirit-filled community and also the family of God. We are sons and daughters of God as Jesus is the Son of God, we in Him & He in us. But we are not yet perfect and it is not always easy to discern in which direction the Spirit is leading, which teachers and guides we can trust. We can debate and discuss, but always in love. We can read the Bible and meditate on what the Church has believed and taught down through the ages. We can pray for wisdom & we can use the faculty of reason which is gift to us. The Holy Spirit leads us into all Truth, but it is a long process and we must be patient and never stop loving God and each other.

O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

March 23rd

II Corinthians 11 vv 9-12

There used to be an advertisement for orange squash showing a parent filling a glass for her child from a tap. The implication was that, while she could give her child a drink for nothing, if she really loved him she'd spend the money and give him a glass of squash. We don't always value what we don't have to pay for. 1970s feminist sociologists said that housework should be paid a wage. What we don't pay for, they argued, we don't value. This seems to be what has happened at Corinth. For what ever reason, Paul didn't think that the Corinthian Christians were in a position to support him financially. He partly earned his own living working as a tentmaker and he was evidently subsidised by other churches, but he didn't take money for himself from the Corinthians. So some of the Corinthians, having received the Gospel free, thought of it as without value, when in fact it is priceless.

March 24th

II Corinthians 11 vv 13-33

False apostles, false teachers of the faith, false prophets, worldly ministers can appear to be very plausible. The standard by which we judge is Jesus and we know Jesus in the words of the Bible and (with greater caution) the teaching of the Church and own reasoning and experience of His Holy Spirit. The false apostles who so impressed the Corinthians looked good. They had a lot going for them and were happy to bask in the respect of other people. In truth, Paul had far more to boast about than they did. He enumerates here some of the reasons he might boast about if he were that kind of person. But he isn't. He says and means, *But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.* (Galatians 6¹⁴), which is all any of us ought to say in recommendation of ourselves.

March 25th (The Annunciation)

II Corinthians 12 vv 1-6

Paul speaks of this vision. Some people think that this is the vision he had of Christ on the Road to Damascus, which brought about his metamorphosis so that he was no longer Saul the destroyer of the Church, but Paul the wise master builder. We know from the Book of Acts, however, that Paul had other visions: telling him to change his plans and preach in Macedonia, rather than continuing in Asia Minor as

March 22nd

II Corinthians 11 v7

We're back to what makes people respect us. Not everyone uses the criteria we considered on 16th. I once spent a few days residential with the army chaplains department who were encouraging young clergy to think about a career as military chaplains. It was remarked that the officers get smarter uniforms, better accommodation, better food and better messes than the other ranks because this at once establishes a hierarchy. The men (and now women) must respect and obey their officers if the army is to be effective and even to survive on the battlefield. Officers ought to be respected for their competence, their courage and their care for their troops and shouldn't last long in post if they're not, but privileges such as higher pay and better food are a short cut to gaining that respect. Recruits don't know their officers until they have been in the army for a while. A similar case has been put for bishops to live in fine houses, drive decent cars (even to be chauffeured), dress well and have the means to entertain, because their role requires them to be respected in society and to mix with the great & the good as equals in order to exert a Christian influence at the highest levels of decision making. At a lower level, something similar has been said of rectors and vicars. If we are to fulfil our potential to exercise leadership and influence, it is argued, that we have a position to maintain, possibly by adopting a professional life style. It is, however, the false apostles who want to take people away from following Paul who have these trappings of worldly respectability. In contrast, Paul is abased. He is a humble man, humble before God, humble before the world. Far from commanding a high salary, he takes no money for himself from the Corinthian Church. As we've seen, he probably lacks the symbols of status that these other would be apostles have. Paul can't rely on short cuts to respectability such as wealth and social status. His only claim to leadership is his integrity. Paul is following Jesus Who Himself took the form of a servant (a slave even), seems to have cared little about money or possessions, refused to allow the crowds to make Him King and had no profession except carpentry.

It's worth pondering and praying about. In the Army & the Airforce, chaplains hold officer rank. Naval chaplains have no rank. Should clergy out in the world have rank or status?

January 9th

II Corinthians 1 v14

We are your rejoicing, as you are also ours.

Joy is characteristic of Christians. Jesus came to give us joy in abundance. Paul teaches us to rejoice in the Lord always. Jesus brings life in all its fulness. *If the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.* The Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life. If you are a Christian, you possess the Holy Spirit. *No man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost...God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father.* We are the children of God & the family of God. Our rejoicing is in God, in His love, His for us and ours for Him. Our rejoicing is in the love that we have for one another as His family. A Christian congregation then rejoices in its ministers and its ministers rejoice in the congregation. *We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord.*

January 10th (Martyrdom of William Laud) II Corinthians 1 vv 15&16

Paul intended to benefit the Church at Corinth by visiting them on the way to Jerusalem. Apart from briefly being Rector of Cuxton, what did William Laud do for the Church of God? He was generous with his not insubstantial fortune. He promoted education in a big way. He did a lot for church discipline. He, according to his lights, sought to order public worship in the beauty of holiness. He could also, however, be a very cruel man. He lacked sensitivity. He was intolerant. He encouraged Charles I in the events leading up to the Civil War. He upset enough important people sufficiently that parliament (unable to find enough evidence to convict him of any capital crime) passed an Act of Attainder and had him beheaded any way on 10th January 1645.

St Paul himself would teach that the flesh lusts against the spirit. All we Christians are pulled in two directions. On the one hand, the Spirit of God moves in our hearts leading us into the Truth in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the flesh, the old man, sin, the world and the devil attempt to drag us in the opposite direction. So Laud's life was ambiguous – some good, some bad. God is his judge, as He is ours. In the end, we all rely on his mercy.

January 11th

II Corinthians 1 vv 17-20

Paul wasn't able to call in at Corinth after all and it would appear that at least some of the Corinthians were disappointed, accusing him of being undependable. Paul not only explains that he didn't make and change his plans casually and without regard for his intended hosts, but takes the opportunity to remind us that God is utterly dependable. I think the implication is that we, too, as the people of God, ought also to be trustworthy & dependable.

All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;

The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
without our aid he did us make;
we are his folk, he doth us feed,
And for his sheep he doth us take.

O enter then his gates with praise,
Approach with joy his courts unto;
Praise, laud, and bless his name always,
For it is seemly so to do.

Him serve with fear,
his praise forth tell, Come ye before him, and rejoice.

For why? the Lord our God is good;
his mercy is forever sure;
His truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.

To Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
The Lord is whom heaven and earth adore,
From men and from the angel-host
Be praise and glory evermore.

January 12th

II Corinthians 1 vv 21&22

You might receive a letter from the executor of a will explaining that you have inherited a million pounds. You won't receive all the money until you are, let's say, 30 years old. You can now, however, receive £1,000. This is an earnest of your inheritance. You can enjoy it now, spending it on whatever you need. It is already yours. It is a foretaste of what is to come when you eventually receive the whole amount. The £1,000 also serves as a guarantee that the other £999,000 is yours and that you will receive it at the appointed time. In the same way, we have the Holy Spirit now. We experience now what it is to be the children of God, but we shall only know the fulness of our inheritance when we get to heaven.

March 20th

II Corinthians 11 vv 3&4

Paul has preached the Gospel plainly at Corinth. Many have believed and been born again. They have found new life, eternal life, through faith in Christ. They have repented of their sins. They have put their faith in God. They have been baptised. They are saved. What remains is for them to live out the rest of their life on earth by God's grace growing in faith & hope & love until that great day on which we shall see Him as He is and be made like Him. *Changed from glory into glory / till in heav'n we take our place / till we cast our crowns before thee / lost in wonder, love and praise.* It's as simple as that. We are free. But other teachers, people who have been treated as though they were apostles, have come to Corinth and muddied the waters. We don't know what they taught, but they had complicated the simple Gospel which Paul had preached, having been commissioned by God to do so. Some of the Corinthian Christians had welcomed these false teachers. They were something new. They seem to have been of higher status than Paul in some worldly respects, more classically educated perhaps, claiming friends in high places. It really isn't clear who these false teachers were or what they taught. What is clear is that we should cleave to the simple truth of the Gospel, no matter how clever or prestigious other preachers might be who try to complicate matters.

March 21st (Martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer, First Day of Spring) II Corinthians 11 vv 5&6

Thomas Cranmer was the Archbishop of Canterbury who advised Henry VIII in the English Church's break with Rome and advised his son Edward VI in reforming the English Church in the light of the insights of the Protestant Reformation. Edward's successor, Queen Mary, wished to reverse these changes and that is why Cranmer died a martyr's death. Cranmer played a big part in securing the availability of the English Bible for us and wrote most of the Book of Common Prayer. I believe that the mediaeval Roman Church had complicated and confused the straightforward Gospel which Paul and the other genuine apostles had proclaimed as recorded in Scripture and that this simple Gospel is beautifully expressed in the Prayer Book services. To be given the simple truth of the Gospel – the Bible in English and the Prayer Book – was indeed the coming of Spring to the English Church.

March 18th

II Corinthians 10 vv 17&18

How do ministers judge themselves? It's very hard to know what good (if any) you are doing. It's not like digging the garden where you can see what you have achieved. Sometimes people are appreciative. Sometimes they are not. Occasionally, you learn that something you did years ago is now bearing fruit. But you wonder if you could have done more to help people in trouble. You wonder if it's your fault that people don't come to church. But you also know that you sometimes have to expect to be unpopular if you stand up for what is right. It is evidently a mistake to be proud and to think too much of yourself. If you do achieve anything worthwhile, it is by the grace of God. It is also a mistake to underrate your performance. If you do that, you provide an opening for Satan to demoralise you and really make you ineffective. Paul says not only to ministers but to all Christians (Romans 12^{3ff}):
³ For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. ⁴ For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: ⁵ So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. By the grace of God we are what we are. He has made each one of us for His purposes and we ought neither to think highly of ourselves as though we were wonderful people high achievers on our own merit nor that we are lowly worthless individuals. Everything that we have we have from God. We are His creation. There's a lot of truth in the words *to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me*, so long as we don't take that to mean that He doesn't want us to strive to better ourselves in order that we might better serve Him, the Church & the world.

March 19th (Lent 4 Mothering Sunday)

II Corinthians 11 vv 1&2

There is a story about two unborn twins in the womb. One asks the other, "Do you believe in life after birth?" There is a whole new world out there which we discover when we become Christians. We ought not to behave as if we had not yet entered into it.

GRANT, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

January 13th

II Corinthians 1 vv 1 vv 23&24

Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but we are helpers in your joy. Christian leadership is a delicate matter. Bishops and other clergy do have authority. But we don't stand between ordinary believers and God. All Christians form a royal priesthood. Every Christian has access to God the Father through Jesus, our great High Priest, the only Mediator & Advocate that there is. Ministers don't lord it over their flocks, (They ought not to anyway.), exercising dominion over the people's faith. On the other hand, the gifts that God has given to ministers in terms of knowledge of the Word etc. are given for the service of the Church so that clergy may be helpers in the joy of all Christians. It is foolish to reject the minister's God-given authority. It is foolish to accord the minister the authority which belongs only to God. Priest and people form a fellowship, the family of God, supporting one another as we seek God's Truth and endeavour to carry out His Will.

January 14th

II Corinthians 2 vv 1-11

These verses presumably refer to the incident Paul deals with in I Corinthians 5, a case of incest. It might have been that Paul's gentile converts were not familiar with the Law of God as revealed in the Old Testament. It might have been that they misunderstood Paul's teaching that we are saved by faith not by works and thought it meant that it didn't matter how badly you behaved so long as you claimed to have faith in God. Of course, if you truly have faith in God, you love Him and try (by His grace) to keep His commandments. It is true that God loves us just as we are, that He forgives us if we repent and believe, that Jesus has paid the price for our sins, but we are set free from sin. We are not set free to sin! Ephesians 2: 8 *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*

Anyway, it would appear that the culprit is sorry. He had been forced to leave the Church. But now he can return, which is the object of Church discipline, the restoration of us sinners and the safeguarding of our fellowship.

January 15th (Epiphany 2)

II Corinthians 2 vv 12-17

It is really difficult to work out Paul's itineraries from his letters and from the account in Acts. Presumably, the opportunity he was given by God to preach in Troas is the reason why he called off his planned return to Corinth. So he had good reason for changing his plans! (Previously he had been unable to preach in Troas as he had then intended because the Holy Spirit had sent him to Macedonia. See Acts 16⁹.) He seems to have been somewhat limited in what he could do there because of the absence of Titus. Anyway, the point is that the work is God's. The victory is God's. Whatever we achieve, we achieve by the grace of God and the glory is always His. When people are confronted with the Truth, they either believe or they don't. Those who accept the Truth rejoice in the life He brings them. Those who reject the Truth condemn themselves. So the preacher of the Truth creates a division between those who receive the Word and those who refuse Him. Those who reject the Word may turn on the preacher. But the authentic messenger of God always speaks sincerely, even if this makes him unpopular.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth; Mercifully hear the supplications of thy people, and grant us thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

January 16th

II Corinthians 3 vv 1-3

Some people in the Church at Corinth have questioned Paul's authority. He responds by saying that they are themselves proof of the validity of his ministry. By God's grace, Paul preached in Corinth. By God's grace, many people in Corinth came to faith. They form a church, a fellowship of love and Paul, though absent in body and having responsibility for and membership of other local churches, is one of them. The existence of the Church in Corinth, its life & growth is sufficient evidence in itself that Paul is an authentic minister of the Gospel. The Corinthian Christians really ought not to be doubting Paul's apostleship. He was one of the main means by which God established His Church in Corinth.

of what you have said. Not actually confronting the person directly on the one hand means that you can say what needs saying without fear of embarrassing retaliation, but it also might tempt you to go further than you should. Email and other electronic media are quick and a record is kept, but they do seem to bring out the worst in us. Because they are quick, we may send them without due reflection and because we can't see the recipient or hear his voice we may be insensitive to how he is taking it. What I think is intolerable is to send a message by any medium anonymously. Your name is a guarantee of integrity. And integrity is what all this is about whether it's Paul writing or talking to the Corinthians or you ending your relationship with your girlfriend or the gas company explaining why they are putting up your direct debit. However you communicate, you have to do so honestly and with respect for the recipient of your communication.

March 16th

II Corinthians 10 v12

Whom do you respect? I'd like to think that we respect people who are honest & sincere, who are unselfish and thoughtful towards others. We also respect people's courage, strength, wisdom, skills, sanctity, qualifications and abilities, especially if these are used humbly for the well-being of society in general as well as for the personal advancement of the particular soldier, labourer, statesman, craftsman, bishop, doctor or musician. But I fear that we sometimes respect people because of their apparent social status, wealth, arrogance or appearance. Christians ought to be very hesitant about judging other people. We are judged by God as we judge others. Other people are God's servants. Who are we to judge our own Master's other servants? If we must judge, Jesus says, *Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.*

March 17th (St Patrick)

II Corinthians 10 vv 13-16

St Patrick is famous as the person who established the Christian Church in Ireland, but he was far from the first. There were plenty of Christians in Ireland when Patrick arrived. Similarly there were missionaries and evangelists preaching in Corinth and other cities apart from Paul. These should not be seen as rivals attracting the loyalties of different factions in the Church, but as co-workers, workers with Christ to build His Church.

March 13th

II Corinthians 10 vv 7&8

A good place to start when thinking about disputes within congregations or between congregations and their minister is to remember that we all belong to Jesus. We no longer judge ourselves and one another after the flesh. *The love of Christ constraineth us.* Granted that Jesus died for us, we no longer live for ourselves but for Him. Our fellow Christians are also the children of God. All Christians have the Holy Spirit. We are to respect one another. It has been said that love doesn't last long where there is no respect. It's a mutual respect between minister and people and between people and people.

March 14th

II Corinthians 10 v8

The authority which God gives to ministers is for edification. Their calling is to build the Church. That means to comfort & strengthen the faithful in their faith and to increase the numbers of people who believe and belong. The Church is unique – not only a human institution, but also, and much more importantly, the foundation of God. We can learn from human institutions – clubs, societies, businesses, political parties, governments, parliaments & local authorities – but fundamentally we are different. Authority should be exercised and disputes resolved always by the grace of the Holy Spirit in such a manner as builds the Church in love and does not tear down and destroy.

March 15th

II Corinthians 10 vv 9-11

If you have to have a difficult conversation with someone, how do you prefer to go about it? It might be a disagreement with a friend or a member of your family. Perhaps you need to make a complaint to a company or a public authority. Maybe you need to discipline a junior or point out to your boss that he is wrong. Perhaps you've done something terrible and need to apologise. Face to face probably is best to avoid misunderstandings, but you might chicken out of saying what needs saying. You might even get thumped. Some people like to talk on the 'phone, though personally I find that difficult – as potentially embarrassing as face to face but with more scope for misunderstanding. You might not be able to hear properly. You can't read the body language. The person you are talking to might hang up. A letter is good in that you can think exactly what you want to say and there is a record

January 17th

II Corinthians 3 vv 4&5

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.

Great man though he was, St Paul was well aware that he had nothing which he had not received. All his achievements depended on God and on God alone. This is equally true for us much less well known Christians than Paul. We all have our own part to play in God's plan. We may be daunted by this thought, but we ought not to be. God supplies us with everything we need to fulfil the tasks for which He has called us. We may be tempted to boast about what wonderful people we are that we have accomplished so much in our lives, but we ought not to boast. Whatever we have, we have received from God.

When I survey the wondrous
cross
On which the Prince of glory
died,
My richest gain I count but
loss,
And pour contempt on all my
pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should
boast,
Save in the death of Christ my
God!
All the vain things that charm
me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood

January 18th (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity) II Corinthians 3 v6

The Church of God is essentially one. We are the Body of Christ. There is only one Christ. He prayed that we should be one. He commanded us to love one another as He has loved us. So, why is the Church divided? Ultimately, the reason is sin. Insofar as we don't love one another, we sin. There are sincere disagreements about doctrine and ethics. As we've grown apart, we've developed different ways of doing things. We sing different hymns, conduct services differently, have different preferences for the ways in which our buildings are ordered. We can sincerely differ, but we must never cease to love one another. When we disagree and debate with our fellow Christians, we should not be seeking to assert our own position. We should be seeking God's Truth in partnership with those whose understanding may be different from our own. One of the things which divide us is the question of who qualifies to be a minister, pastor or priest. Whatever we think about ordination etc., a minister's role is as a minister of the New Testament – helping Christians to grow in faith, hope & love.

January 19th

II Corinthians 3 vv 6&7

There is a kind of religion which is depressing. It seems to be based on rules and threats of punishment if you transgress. Practitioners of such religions may be arrogant & self-righteous, despising others, or they may be consumed with guilt, feeling that they can never be good enough to be loved. The Pharisaic tendency in Judaism had interpreted (Dare I say misinterpreted?) the Old Testament in this way. God had given Moses the Law. If you didn't keep the Law perfectly, you were doomed. Paul's encounter with Christ had taught him that this was the wrong approach. Yes, the Law does set out the principles by which the people of God should live. It does warn of judgment and punishment if we fail to live up to our calling as God's people. But God doesn't just love us if we are good. He loves us as we are. Because He loves us as we are, He sends Jesus to die for our sins, setting us free from sin and the fear of death. If we repent & believe, we are set free from the consequences of our sinful nature. We are set free to be good, to fulfil God's Commandments – that service which is perfect freedom. We are not depressed by guilt and the apparent impossibility of obeying the Law's demands. We aren't arrogant enough to think that we are such good people that God owes us. We are people of love who live in faith & hope and are filled with Christian joy.

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

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

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

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

January 20th

II Corinthians 3 vv 7&8

When God gave Moses the Law on Mt Sinai, the ground shook, there were thunder and lightning, the sound of a Trumpet. When Moses came out from speaking with God, his face shone. The glory of God was almost tangible. Yet the true glory was Christ dying on the Cross

March 11th

II Corinthians 9 vv 10-15

Like many English Christians, my focus is on the parish. This is where I worship. These are the people I worship with. It is here that I receive God's grace and it is in this community that I hope by that grace to live out my Christian life: praising God, preaching & teaching the faith, with prayer & thanksgiving for my needs and for those of other people, caring for one another, and making these two villages a bit more like the Kingdom of God. But we are part of a much greater whole – the whole state of Christ's Church militant here in earth and triumphant in Heaven. In the same way the Macedonians, the Achaeans, all the Gentile Churches, the Jerusalem Church and all the Jewish Churches were all one. They pooled the resources God had so generously given them – material and spiritual. There was fellowship, shared thanksgiving, shared prayer, shared grace and shared joy.

March 12th (Lent 3)

II Corinthians 10 vv 1-6

We're back to this issue of authority in the Church. The minister derives his authority from God. In the Church of England, the process begins when it is believed that the person may have been called by God to ordained ministry. Over a long process of discernment, the Church and the candidate seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He spends time studying the Scriptures and other subjects an ordained minister needs to understand. If the candidate and the Church are confident that this is a genuine calling, the new minister receives from God the particular grace he requires in order to fulfil his vocation at ordination. Subsequently, when appointed to a parish, he is given the spiritual (and because we are the established Church) the legal authority he needs to do his work. But the exercise of ministerial authority depends, to a large extent, on its being accepted by the congregation – who are themselves kings and priests of God's Church. The Corinthians, some of them at least, dispute Paul's authority. "He writes good letters but he wouldn't talk to us like that to our face." "Anyway, he's not one of the original apostles. How do we know that his distinctive teaching is genuine?" "Anyway, we like Apollos better than Paul." How are these issues to be resolved? **WE** beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

March 9th

II Corinthians 9 v7

I don't know if this story is true, but it makes a point. The village Church was raising money for a project which would be of enormous benefit to everyone. The vicar asked the squire for a donation. The squire was really impressed with the plans and offered to give £100. The vicar refused to accept £100, saying, that if the squire really believed in this he could easily give £1,000. The version of the story I heard has the squire giving £1,000. But, if the squire had refused to raise his donation, would the vicar have been right to turn down the £100? Maybe he would. Isn't a bit of an insult to God to offer Him an amount which means very little to us?

March 10th

II Corinthians 9 vv 8&9

Here it is. God's resources are infinite. His generosity is infinite. We cannot lose by offering back to God what He has given to us.

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

2 Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of thy love. Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for thee, swift and beautiful for thee.

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

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

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

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

January 21st

II Corinthians 3 vv 9-11

Paul's point is that the New Testament is infinitely more glorious than the Old. The Old Testament was temporary. The New Testament is eternal. The Law revealed what sin is and pronounced God's just judgment on us sinners – death. The New Testament sets us free from sin. By means of the Death of Jesus, God Himself fulfils the Law's demands. While, *the wages if sin is death*, then, *the gift of God is eternal life*. Wages are what we deserve. What we in fact we receive, we receive from God gratis.

January 22nd (Epiphany 3)

II Corinthians 3 vv 11-15

If we think about it, what God did for us when Christ died for us on the Cross is far more awe-inspiring than His manifestation of Himself on Mt Sinai (what is technically called a theophany). He reveals His true nature in giving Himself as a sacrifice of perfect love. The effect is not only to transform this world, but to alter our prospects for eternity.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

January 23rd

II Corinthians 3 vv 16-18

You really need to read Exodus 35 from v29 to understand this – and it's still not easy. When Moses speaks with God, his face shines with God's glory. This is too much for the Israelites and Moses puts a veil over his face, which he removes when he returns to speak with God. Moses' radiance is fading. The Law is a temporary measure until Christ comes. The Death of Jesus removes the veil, as the veil of the Temple was rent in twain when He died on the Cross. Through Him, we have open access to the Father and, through our communion with Him, we are transformed into His likeness. We glow with His glory, not a fading radiance like Moses', but an eternal light. If we read the Old Testament in the light of the Holy Spirit, we recognise that this was its message all along. To read the Bible with the eyes of the flesh, without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is to read it as through a veil. When we read the Bible we pray for enlightenment. The Spirit sets us free. The Spirit brings life. We read the Word written in the Light of the Word made flesh.

January 24th

II Corinthians 4 vv 1&2

As a preacher, you have to have people willing to listen to you. As a pastor, you have to be accepted by a congregation. It's pointless being a leader if nobody follows you. If you tell people what they don't want to hear, they may refuse to listen. The congregation drifts away, perhaps. If the pastoral care you offer isn't the vindication of the current life style of your congregation which they desire, they may look elsewhere for a shepherd. If you boldly set off in a particular direction which others think is mistaken or just too arduous for them to follow, they may leave you to get on with it alone.

So, the temptation is to avoid saying hard things, always to try to please even at the expense of conscience, and not to make demands on people which they don't feel obliged to respond to.

On the other hand, if you are harsh, judgmental and uncompromising, you may fail to reach people who desperately need your ministry.

And of course, when you are sure you know better than everybody else in the Church, you may be wrong. But then again you may not be!

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

(*Curates* in this context are vicars and rectors and all who have the cure of souls.)

January 25th (Conversion of St Paul)

II Corinthians 4 vv 4&5

Paul literally saw the Light on the Road to Damascus. It is God Who makes it possible for us to have faith. The Devil tries to stop us. So prayer is a vital component of evangelism. Pray for the people you hope will be converted.

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

March 7th

II Corinthians 9 vv 1-5

Awkward again talking about money. Both the Achaean (people from around Corinth) and the Macedonians want to give to the fund for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. There is a degree of rivalry and the potential for embarrassment if either falls short of what they have committed to.

Christian Stewardship campaigns aim to encourage Christians to think and pray about what they should give in the light of all the blessings which they have received from God. *All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee.*

I'm told that in America these are very public events. People stand up and pledge what they intend to give. The richest man in the hall might pledge \$10,000, the next \$7,500 and so on down to the people who can only manage \$20. The generosity of the first people to make their pledges inspires the generosity of others. It sets a good example. On the other hand, such public proclamation by people of their own generosity might just be boasting and it might embarrass the widow who in giving just one mite (1/2 farthing) is giving her all which is worth much more, in God's eyes, than the billionaire who gives the \$10,000. Jesus warned, *Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen by them: otherwise ye have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.* It's probably safer spiritually to do these things the English way – without fuss and in confidence. However, if you decide how much you should give when only God knows, do you give more or less than you would give if everyone knew?

March 8th

II Corinthians 9 v6

There is a strong thread running through the Bible to the effect that if we give to the poor God will not allow us ourselves to go without. It doesn't say that He will make us rich in material terms, though we are certainly rich spiritually if we have generous hearts. We may be quite poor in the eyes of the world, but we do have enough. Maybe you can think of people you know, who, while not rich themselves, have been very generous to other people and found that they have never run out of what they really needed.

continuing of the same, until it be thoroughly finished, that yieldeth the true glory; through him who, for the finishing of thy work, laid down his life for us, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen.

March 5th (Lent 2)

II Corinthians 8 vv 12-15

Paul doesn't expect us to impoverish ourselves when we give away something of what we have in order to meet the needs of others. We might ask ourselves what *impoverish* means? There's quite a lot of things I have which I think of almost as necessities, though I could survive without them. I could sell the TV and give the money to a charity supporting people who haven't even got enough to eat. That's a calculation for each one of us to make prayerfully, thoughtfully & rationally. Paul talks about equality. The donor of money may one day be poor himself and hope that other people will then be generous towards him, maybe people he has himself helped in the past. Those to whom we give money may reciprocate in other ways. The Jerusalem Church, though financially poor, was the means through which the Gospel began to be preached worldwide. Financially poor Churches in Africa, Asia & South America are very often spiritually rich and support us by their fellowship, example and prayers in ways which more than repay any financial assistance we give them.

ALMIGHTY God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves; Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

March 6th

II Corinthians 8 vv 16-24

It's not always easy to find someone willing to be church treasurer. It is a very responsible job. You not only have to handle, count and bank the money and cheques, as well as keep track of payments made in other ways; you have to ensure that bills are paid, agreed donations to missions and charities are despatched; and keep an accurate account of all this for the parishioners, the diocese and the Charity Commission. It is a responsible job. We need people who are capable and, obviously, people who are honest. They may also need a thick skin. Parishioners sometimes take it out on the treasurer if he or she has to say there isn't enough money to do what we want to or to blame the treasurer if there appear to be any discrepancies. So support your treasurers!

January 26th

II Corinthians 4 v6

The first of all things to be created is light. Everything else followed from the creation of light. God said, *Let there be light: And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good.* And everything else followed from that: heaven and earth, sea and dry land, this planet and the heavenly bodies, inanimate matter and energy and living beings, human beings made in God's image. That light is something, isn't it? Pause and marvel. Light is essential to the existence of the physical universe and light is the creation of God. This is what, for want of a better term, one might call mortal light – light bound up with time & space, light essential to time and space. There is light which is not bound up with time and space, however. There is eternal Light, infinitely more wonderful than created Light. Jesus is the Light of the world – begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. This is the Light which, by God's grace, shines in our hearts as Christian believers.

January 27th

II Corinthians 4 v7

Frail earthen vessels.

The grace of God dwells in us. As Christians, we are in Christ and He in us. We are the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit lives in the hearts of Christians. He lives in the Church. By this grace, Paul achieved great things. We achieve great things. Jesus promises, *He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.* He goes to the Father at His Ascension and pours upon us His Holy Spirit so that we can perform His works in the world. We might not be Billy Graham or Mother Theresa, but we all have our place in God's plan. God has prepared good works for each of us to do. But the power is God's; the glory is God. We are earthen vessels – humble, weak, fragile - yet God, in His Wisdom, has entrusted us with this treasure. One of the best explanations of the Church I know is contained in this prayer to be said after receiving Holy Communion.

ALMIGHTY and everliving God, we most heartily thank thee, for that thou dost vouchsafe to feed us, who have duly received these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ; and dost assure us thereby of thy

favour and goodness towards us; and that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom, by the merits of the most precious death and passion of thy dear Son. And we most humbly beseech thee , O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. *Amen.*

January 28th

II Corinthians 4 vv 8&9

Paul has many troubles and challenges in his life, but he is not overcome by them. He is a man of prayer and we know that, in at least one case, he asked God to take a trouble away. God's response was not to take away Paul's trouble, but to tell him *My grace is sufficient for you*. I often wonder why people have to put up with the bad things that happen to them. They may be good people. They pray themselves. We pray for them. So, why doesn't God magic their troubles away? I don't know. He must have His reasons. But we do know that His grace is sufficient for us.

January 29th (Epiphany 4)

II Corinthians 4 vv 10&11

Some people believe that Paul carried the stigmata, wounds like the marks of the nails in the hands and feet of Jesus when He was crucified. There are people who have these marks, nobody knows quite why. Maybe it is a result of intense meditation on what Jesus did for us on the Cross. Maybe it is some kind of gift or sign from God. I think what Paul means here, however, is that, like all Christians, he is crucified with Christ. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, he tries to mortify his members which are upon earth, to overcome the flesh with all its human weaknesses. He suffers persecution and temptation to the faithfulness of the Gospel, pain which Jesus endured and shares with His servants. Colossians 1 v24: Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:

O GOD, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright; Grant to us such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

March 2nd

II Corinthians 8 vv 5-7

There are many reasons for giving money. Sometimes we donate to a charity or an individual because we see a need. Sometimes we give people presents just because we love them, not because they are in any particularly desperate need. Hence the problem *What do I give for Christmas to the man who has everything?* We also may feel the need to be generous simply because we have received so much. *Freely ye have received. Freely give.* We give not only our money, but our very selves in love. The money we give then is just an earnest of our gift of ourselves. *WITH this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.* Or, as the new marriage service puts it: *With my body I honour you, all that I have I share with you, all that I am I give to you.* Sharing what we have follows from giving what we are whether to our wife, to God, or to other people whom we are commanded to love as Christ loved us.

March 3rd

II Corinthians 8 vv 8&9

Talking about money is always embarrassing and it is difficult in the Church. The minister who speaks about the importance of giving puts himself at risk of giving offence. Paul doesn't command the Corinthians to give. For centuries in countries like England, tithe payments were compulsory. The rector was legally entitled to a proportion of parishioners' harvests. This certainly led to resentment when the rector was better off than the people paying the tithes or those he was tithing were not members of the Church of England. Giving is, however, imperative for us. The Church needs money to do her work. So do missions and charities. We may have family members or even friends who are to some extent relying on our generosity. Sometimes we might be asked to help an obviously impoverished stranger. It is also essential to our mental and spiritual health that we are generous. Jesus says, *It is better to give than to receive.*

March 4th

II Corinthians 8 vv 10&11

Do you ever wonder whether all those people who make pledges to give, say, to *Children in Need* actually make good on their promises? Or were some of them swept up in the tide of enthusiasm? Lord God, when thou givest to thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the

February 28th

II Corinthians 7 vv 6-16

Church discipline is a difficult business. Church leaders cannot be complacent about sin. Sin is what alienates us from God. It disrupts the fellowship. It undermines our relationship as individuals with our heavenly Father. It impedes our work in the world outside the Church. But a Christian minister exercising his authority to discipline may alienate the Church. The Church may not recognise his authority. Moreover, the minister, if he is a wise man, is only too aware that he is himself a sinner, utterly dependent on the mercy of God. As a Christian pastor, his aim is not to make the sinner worse by punishing him, perhaps even destroying him. The ultimate aim of Church discipline is to restore the sinner and to safeguard the integrity of the Church. This Paul has achieved at Corinth, but it has caused him a great deal of anguish and has created controversy within the congregation. Those responsible for Church discipline need our prayers. From the order for the consecration of bishops: *Grant, we beseech thee, to this thy servant, such grace, that he may evermore be ready to spread abroad thy Gospel, the glad tidings of reconciliation with thee; and use the authority given him, not to destruction, but to salvation; not to hurt, but to help: so that, as a wise and faithful servant, giving to thy family their portion in due season, he may at last be received into everlasting joy;*

March 1st

I Corinthians 8 vv 1-5

Jesus ascended into Heaven from Jerusalem and it was in that city that the Holy Spirit came on the apostles at Pentecost. The Church began in Jerusalem and missionaries took the Gospel from there to Judaea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Some of these missionaries were apostles or designated ministers. Others took their faith with them when they were forced to flee persecution. Some, no doubt, in their ordinary travels on business or for other reasons, took the opportunity to share their faith with the people they met. Paul received his commission to be an apostle independently of the Jerusalem Church and he was the principal apostle in the mission to the gentiles, establishing churches around the Mediterranean Sea. Nevertheless and, despite tensions, it was imperative for Paul to preserve the unity of the Church, the predominantly Jewish Church in the Holy Land and the predominantly Gentile Churches he founded. The Jerusalem Church was very poor and Paul's Gentile Churches collected alms for them.

January 30th

II Corinthians 4 v12

Colossians 1 v24: *Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:*

I quoted this verse yesterday and it is far from easy to understand. In today's reading, Paul talks about death working in him, but life in us, his readers. I think what he means is that by enduring temptation and pain in his faithfulness to the Gospel, he is able to communicate the Good News of Jesus to people in all the towns and villages to which he is sent. Through his preparedness to undergo the hardships of travel and his willingness to brave opposition and persecution, he is able to bring his hearers the Good News of Jesus. The extent of his love is manifest in what he is prepared to undergo. He sets us an example of what it means to take up our cross and follow Christ. He is able to offer comfort to us because he is himself comforted by God. Paul, walking in the way of the cross, brings us the gift of eternal life. In all this, he is following in the footsteps of Jesus and sharing in His Death & Resurrection. This is our calling too.

January 31st

II Corinthians 4 vv 13&14

I've heard of Christians who were said to be so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good. It is possible that the pendulum has swung too far the other way. We have become so focused on this world that we have forgotten that it is not our true home. We put on one side the truth that we are, in fact, citizens of heaven. We support foodbanks and other charities. We send out medical missionaries and teachers. We try to promote political policies which tend towards social justice. We encourage one another to behave well. We look after our health and try to make sure that we can support ourselves. All these are good things to do, Christian things. They are, however, very far from the whole story. Our mortal life here on earth is but a tiny fraction of our eternity. The joys we have here and now are no more than an earnest of the joy which is to come. The love we experience here on earth is just a foretaste of the love that we shall know when we know as we are known. It is this knowledge of our eternal life in Jesus which provides us with the hope which we need to persevere and inspires us to live the very best life on earth of which we are capable.

February 1st

II Corinthians 4 vv 15-18

For all things are for your sakes.

I once attended a lecture in which the speaker spoke about both the phenomenal length of time and the phenomenal extent of the universe with its trillions of billions of stars and the vast spaces between them, not to mention the phenomenal forces which govern their movements, their generation and destruction, and the mysterious dark energy and dark matter which apparently must exist but of which we understand so little. His point was that we are so small in comparison to the universe and that we have been around for such a very short time in comparison with the age of creation. As the psalmist said thousands of years previously, *For I will consider thy heavens, even the works of thy fingers : the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained. What is man, that thou art mindful of him : and the son of man, that thou visitest him?* And yet, He is mindful of us. All this was created for us, human beings made in His image. Christ died for each one of us. The Second Person of the Trinity, through Whom all things were made, was made man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate. The Third Person of the Trinity, the Lord and Giver of Life, has spoken to us and inhabits us. The Church exists to glorify God by proclaiming the Gospel to the whole of humanity, to teach the world what Jesus has taught us, and to baptize into this fellowship all those who come to faith.

It is a thing most wonderful,
almost too wonderful to be,
that God's own Son should
come from heav'n,
and die to save a child like me.

And yet I know that it is true:
He chose a poor and humble
lot,
and wept and toiled and
mourned and died
for love of those who loved Him
not.

I cannot tell how He could love
a child so weak and full of sin;
His love must be most

wonderful
if He could die my love to win.

I sometimes think about the
cross,
and shut my eyes, and try to
see
the cruel nails and crown of
thorns,
and Jesus crucified for me.

But even could I see Him die,
I could but see a little part
of that great love which, like a
fire,
is always burning in His heart.

February 25th

3 As they offered
gifts most rare
at thy cradle, rude
and bare,
so may we with
holy joy,
pure and free from
sin's alloy,
all our costliest
treasures bring,
Christ, to thee,
our heav'nly King.

4 Holy Jesus, ev'ry
day
keep us in the
narrow way;
and, when earthly
things are past,
bring our
ransomed souls at
last
where they need
no star to guide,
where no clouds
thy glory hide.

II Corinthians 7 v1

5 In the heav'nly
country bright
need they no
created light;
thou its light, its
joy, its crown,
thou its sun which
goes not down.
There forever may
we sing
alleluias to our
King!

February 26th (Lent 1)

II Corinthians 7 vv 2-5

As we've seen, Paul endured a great deal for his faithfulness to the Gospel. He travelled huge distances in a time when travel was difficult and dangerous. He was robbed. He was ship wrecked. He met opposition and persecution by both the Jews and Romans. He was beaten, stoned, imprisoned and at last beheaded. Sometimes he was let down by his friends. The Churches to whom he was apostle, minister & pastor presented him with all kinds of challenges. As all Christians are called to do, Paul walked in the way of the Cross. Jesus too was tempted & suffered & died and He accompanies us on our journey, strengthening, guiding, forgiving, sustaining, ultimately leading us home.

O LORD, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights; Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness, and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. *Amen*

February 27th

II Corinthians 7 vv 6&7

God cares for Paul and Paul finds comfort in that his friend Titus has come to him with good news that the Corinthian Christians too are open to Paul's love & leadership.

Well I know thy trouble,
O my servant true:
Thou art very weary,
I was weary too;

But that toil shall make thee
Some day all mine own,
And the end of sorrow
Shall be near my throne.

marriage has been much more about the causes for which matrimony was ordained listed in the traditional Prayer Book.

First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.

February 24th (St Matthias) II Corinthians 6 vv 16-18

What the Church is meant to be is a holy fellowship, holy because we are sanctified by God – our sins are forgiven in Christ – and holy because the Holy Spirit inspires us to live up to our sanctification. Such a fellowship is characterised by love and joy. We await the consummation when this will indeed be the way the Church is. Until that time, sin defiles our fellowship with God and with one another.

4 Tho' with a scornful
wonder
the world sees her
oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder,
by heresies distressed,
yet saints their watch are
keeping;
their cry goes up, "How
long?"
and soon the night of
weeping
shall be the morn of song.

5 'Mid toil and tribulation
and tumult of her war
she waits the
consummation
of peace forevermore
till with the vision glorious
her longing eyes are blest,
and the great Church
victorious
shall be the Church at
rest.

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

It is most wonderful to know
His love for me so free and
sure;
but 'tis more wonderful to see
my love for Him so faint and
poor.

And yet I want to love Thee,
Lord;
O light the flame within my
heart,
and I will love Thee more and
more,
until I see Thee as Thou art.

It's that last but one verse that gets me.

February 2nd (The Presentation of Christ in the Temple) II Corinthians 4 vv 16&17)

On the 40th day, Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the Temple at Jerusalem to do what the Law required. It was a magnificent building. The worship was sublime. Millions of pilgrims visited each year, while the ministers of the Temple performed their duties in their courses. Two old people – Simeon and Hannah – recognised the Infant Messiah, worshipped God, spoke to Mary and Joseph and the crowds about His significance and Simeon prophesied His Death. Jesus is *a light to lighten the Gentiles & the glory of thy people Israel*. Jesus is the Light of the World. He lights up our lives. He lights our way, our way to heaven. We walk with Him in the green pastures & on the steep and rugged pathways of this life, till we come to the city of eternal light.

ALMIGHTY and everliving God, we humbly beseech thy Majesty, that, as thy only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple in substance of our flesh, so we may be presented unto thee with pure and clean hearts, by the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

February 3rd II Corinthians 4 v18

Increasingly, as I get older, when I take Tommy out for runs, I keep my eyes on the path in front of me, both because I can't see as well as I used to and also because it's more painful and harder to get up than it used to be if I trip over a root or slip in the mud. The consequence is that I do not always take in the broader view of where we are going – those beautiful trees across the valley, for example. This is a loss and I have to make a point of looking up sometimes, even of stopping or looking back. It would be a dull life if I spent all my time looking out for mud and trip hazards. We do need to pay attention to our immediate surroundings on the journey of life, but not at the expense of losing sight of the bigger picture.

February 4th

II Corinthians 5 v1

Most people die in hospital, which is often not ideal. Hospitals are places geared up to cure, if possible, our mental and physical illnesses. Given that, the death of a patient can seem to be a failure. Increasingly desperate treatment regimes may be instituted in a final effort to prevent the patient from dying. When death does take place, the body may be quickly covered up or moved so that other patients and staff don't have to deal with seeing the evidence that this time modern medicine has not succeeded and this embarrassing reminder that we shall all die some time, no matter how skilful the doctors and nurses. Now don't misunderstand me. I'm very much in favour of giving people the very best treatment, however hopeless their case may appear to be. I am well aware from my own experience that family members may not want to let a loved one go, even if the patient himself is ready to die. But ultimately death is inevitable. It is not a failure. Death may be the final healing. Someone once asked me not to pray for her husband because he was suffering so much. I told her that we should pray for him and the answer could be that God would now take him home to the place where there is no more suffering. The hospice movement aims to provide treatment which relieves pain and preserves dignity even when there is no hope (short of a miracle) of recovery. If family can cope, home can be the best place to die when there is nothing more that can be done for you in hospital. *For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.* The best is yet to come.

February 5th (Septuagesima)

II Corinthians 5 vv 2-4

This time of year, we shift from celebrating Christmas, when Jesus comes down from Heaven to preparing for Easter when He rises from the dead and ascends into heaven to prepare a place for us. In today's somewhat difficult reading, Paul, having known Christ on earth, is looking forward to being in His Presence in Heaven.

O LORD, we beseech thee favourably to hear the prayers of thy people; that we, who are justly punished for our offences, may be mercifully delivered by thy goodness, for the glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. *Amen.*

February 23rd

II Corinthians 6 vv 14&15

The issue of mixed marriages is a vexed one. What happens if a Christian falls in love with someone who is not a Christian? Should they marry? If they are forbidden by their Church, their family or their conscience to marry, there may be heartbreak. The same issue arises for people of other religions. Are they forbidden to marry out of their community, their faith? Some Christians would even think it wrong to marry someone of another Christian denomination. On the other hand, many people would say it is cruel to forbid two people who love one another to marry because they have different faiths. There are four obvious arguments against mixed marriages.

1. Your relationship with God and your relationship with your husband and wife are the two most important things in your life. It is very hard if they are pulling you in different directions.
2. As a person of faith, you will want your children to know the joy that you have in being a Christian. What if your spouse does not want your children to be taught the Gospel?
3. Very often, it is the religious person in a marriage who is influenced by the other, rather than the other way round. It may not be deliberate outright opposition, but the family gets into the way of treating Sunday as a day of work or leisure rather than worship, there is no time for church activities in busy working and social lives, there is reluctance to donate from the family budget to the Church and Christian work. So the local Church may be diminished when her members marry out.
4. Christian marriage is a type of the relationship between Christ and His Church. Is this possible if one of the couple is not a Christian?

I recognise the force of those arguments and Paul's words in the epistles are Holy Scripture and so cannot be disregarded, but I would find it very hard to tell a couple in love that they could not marry because one was not a Christian. Who am I to judge whether someone is a Christian or not? Only God knows who are His people. The Christian husband or wife may bring the other to a more meaningful faith. Christian marriage sanctifies the children. The Christian wife sanctifies her husband (I Corinthians 7, where Paul is talking about marriages already in existence when one of them is converted).

It might also be relevant that romantic love as the main reason for marriage is a relatively modern notion. For most of human history,

iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

And sometimes it is our Christian duty to confront what is wrong in a congregation, even if doing so does cause offence. It was something Jesus did a lot of!

February 21st II Corinthians 6 vv 4-10
Paul's authenticity as an apostle is manifest in the person he is, the words he says and the things he does. This is a very beautiful and much loved passage. As we take in what Paul says, we understand something of why Paul was so key to the early establishment of the Church. We praise God for Paul. He had an extremely special vocation.

You know what I'm going to say, however. Our authenticity as Christians is manifest in the people we are, the words we say and the things we do. That is true whether we have a glorious calling such as Paul's or one of the much more humble and less spectacular vocations which most of us have.

February 22nd (Ash Wednesday) II Corinthians 6 vv 11-13
Paul is big hearted. His heart is open to God, open to love & worship and praise. Paul's love for God and for other people is the proper response to the love which God has shown him. Paul's experience of God's love moves and enables him to welcome into his heart the Corinthian believers. Their narrow mindedness, their reservations about Paul and his doctrine & pastoral care, close up their hearts so that they are unable to reciprocate fully the love Paul has for them, the love God has for them. Paul urges them to open up to God's Holy Spirit. What might be holding us back from whole-heartedly loving God and our fellow human beings?

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

February 6th II Corinthians 5 v5
For seventy years until last year, this was the anniversary of the Accession of our monarch, for which forms of prayer with thanksgiving to Almighty God are provided. If we hold this seldom-used service this year it will be on 8th September. Last year saw the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and there were many expressions of sadness at our loss and words of appreciation for her long life of faithful service to this country, to the commonwealth and to the wider world. Her Majesty herself regarded her life as a life of service to God. Her faith guided and upheld her in the many challenges she faced and enabled her to discharge her duties as effectively as she did. So it was for St Paul. So it should be for all Christians. What Paul knew, and I am sure that Queen Elizabeth knew, and what we should know is that God has made us the people we are and has given us all that we have and has enabled us to serve Him here on earth and has promised us a place at His side in heaven. The same Holy Spirit Who has sustained and directed our lives on earth is an earnest of the inheritance that we have in heaven. So Paul says, *Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing* – which means our late Queen and, I hope, you & me also.

[By the way, the internet attributed this verse to James rather than Paul. Even the internet isn't infallible – though James 1¹² is pertinent and worth reading.]

February 7th II Corinthians 5 v6
When I was a first year medical student, I attended All Souls Langham Place in London. There were large congregations including many people like me who were new to the capital city. The Church provided smaller groups for prayer, fellowship and bible study. Our group read Paul's Epistle to the Philippians in which Paul talks about the two possibilities confronting him. He might be executed by the Roman government or spared. In the latter case, he will continue to serve God and His Church in this world. But the former is his desire, *to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.* We were young men, just starting out on our adult lives, with everything before us. Paul's words made us think.

February 8th

II Corinthians 5 v7

For we walk by faith, not by sight.

Familiar words, often quoted. How else can we live our lives in this world, but by faith? God loves us. He holds us in His Hands. We can only trust Him. But we do not yet see. We shall only see clearly when this life is over and we enter fully into His Presence. Meditate on St Paul's words in Romans 5. This is what it is to live as a Christian under God's providential care: ¹*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:* ²*By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.* ³*And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;* ⁴*And patience, experience; and experience, hope:* ⁵*And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.*

February 9th

II Corinthians 5 vv 8-10

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

There is a right way to live. We shall be called to account for what we have done with our lives and the talents and opportunities God has given us. We shall be judged. There is reward and there is punishment. That is the reality. It is true that none of us would be good enough to go to Heaven except Jesus and there is only one alternative destination. It is true that God does not desire the death of a sinner and that He is infinitely merciful. We know that if we repent of our sins and put our faith in Him, we shall be saved. We don't know whether all of the human race might be saved in the providence of God, whether only a few are saved or whether the proportion is somewhere in between. When the disciples asked Jesus, He didn't give them a direct answer. Paul teaches that God *will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.* We also know that He respects human freedom to reject His Love. Whatever the truth of that, we must take judgment seriously. Sin does matter. It is the cause of so much pain and suffering in the world. We sinners do deserve to be condemned and punished. Only when we have understood the seriousness of judgment can we appreciate the miracle of mercy – God's offer to us of complete forgiveness through what Jesus accomplished on the Cross for us.

February 19th (Quinquagesima)

II Corinthians 6 vv 1&2

How might it be that *we receive the grace of God in vain?* I suppose, insofar as we do not live up to our Christian calling. In the Parable of the Sower (Luke 6⁵⁻¹⁵), the seed is the Word of God. Some of it falls on the path and is instantly devoured by the birds. It never even looks like it might grow and bear fruit. Some of the seed falls in good soil and there is a wonderful harvest. But there are two other kinds of ground on which the seed falls. When it does so, it begins to grow promisingly. It looks as if there will be a good harvest. But one lot of seed has actually fallen on rocky ground. It starts off all right, but when persecution or trouble comes, it withers and dies. The Word had never truly taken root. Similarly, some seed falls among thorns. It starts off all right, but becomes choked by the weeds – the cares and riches and pleasures of this life – and so it never comes to fruition. The rocky ground and the thorn infested ground have received the grace of God in vain. They've given up when the going got tough. They've allowed the things of this world to crowd out their relationship with Christ. Their love (charity, agape) has grown cold.

O LORD, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee; Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. *Amen.*

February 20th

II Corinthians 6 v3

It is often thought that clergy should be careful not to give offence. If the vicar offends people, they feel justified in not coming to Church. The individuals concerned lose out on the blessings of being part of a Christian fellowship. The Church misses out on the contribution that person would have made to the life of the congregation. If the vicar offends enough people, the congregation melts away and that particular Church dies. And it's all the vicar's fault! It is true, of course, that, like all other Christians, clergy should not give gratuitous offence. We all ought to be sensitive to one another's needs and feelings. We ought not, however, to take offence too easily and to overreact. Charity (Christian love) suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in

February 17th

II Corinthians 5 v20

Most Church of England services include a confession of sin. The Roman Catholic Church encourages her members to make frequent confession before a priest who will give advice and encouragement and pronounce God's absolution on those who truly repent. More informally, whatever denomination of the Church you belong to, you have probably been encouraged to examine your life (daily? weekly? especially in Lent? or before receiving Holy Communion?) We shall not be made perfect until we die and see God as He is. We are sinners. If we are Christians, we are redeemed sinners. We should, however, continue to acknowledge our sins before God and to seek His grace to become daily more like the people He would want us to be.

I think the BCP puts it very well. The Scripture moveth us, in sundry places, to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father; but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart; to the end that we may obtain forgiveness of the same, by his infinite goodness and mercy. And although we ought, at all times, humbly to acknowledge our sins before God; yet ought we chiefly so to do, when we assemble and meet together to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul.

February 18th

II Corinthians 5 v21

Jesus swaps places with us. We are sinners. We fail to love God with all our hearts, souls, mind and strength. We don't love our neighbours as ourselves. We leave undone what we ought to do and we do what we ought not to do. There is no health in us. Humanity's calling is to be at one with God, to be married to God. So apostasy (falling away from the one true God to worship the false gods humanity has invented) is the equivalent of adultery. *The wages of sin is death.* Only one human being has ever lived a perfect human life. Only one human being has not deserved to die. And yet He has. He died in our place. He has died that we might live. All we have to is to repent and to believe – a wonderful Gospel to proclaim.

February 10th

II Corinthians 5 vv 11-12

How do you recognise an authentic minister of God? Is it that he went to a good college? Is it the fact that he has many qualifications? Is it that he comes well-recommended? Is it that he is widely respected? Is it that he is kind pastor, an efficient administrator or a good fund-raiser even? Is it that he is an imposing presence in the pulpit or a notable figure at the altar? All these things could be good in a minister, but, what matters most of all is that he delivers the full counsels of God. (See Acts 20 vv 17-35).

February 11th

II Corinthians 5 vv 13&14

Some people possibly thought that Paul was “over the top” – too full of enthusiasm. The Roman Governor Festus accused him, *Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.* Paul welcomed hardship and suffering for the sake of the Gospel. He spoke with tongues. He was a visionary. Was he what some might call a religious maniac? Was Paul a fanatic? He claimed an authority which he had received directly from the Lord which did not depend on the more established apostles like Peter & James and the Jerusalem Church. Other people tried to claim authority in the Church because they reckoned that they did have the backing of the Jerusalem Church and thought of themselves as altogether superior to Paul. Paul's response is that everything he has, he has received from God, he is the person God has made him and his hearers themselves (and the readers of his letters including us) can see for ourselves that what Paul teaches is the truth of God.

February 12th (Sexagesima)

II Corinthians 5 vv 14&15

The love of Christ constraineth us.

I love these words. Whatever people thought about Paul, he was the man he was because he had given his life to the Lord. When we think of what Jesus has done for us, can we really hold back from offering back to Him our whole lives?

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

February 13th

II Corinthians 5 v16

Paul didn't know Jesus before his conversion on the Road to Damascus. He knew something of His teaching. He knew some of the followers of Jesus and thought it his duty to persecute them and to extinguish the nascent Church. It is not impossible that Paul (Saul as he would then have been) had seen Jesus and heard Him speak, but, if he did, it isn't mentioned anywhere in the Bible. He only knew Jesus after the flesh. He knew of Jesus the man and Saul / Paul had his own human ideas about Jesus. Then Saul was converted and came to know Jesus properly. He didn't only know about Jesus. He knew Jesus. He no longer only knew about Christ's disciples. He was one of them. He no longer saw the Church as something alien to God which ought to be destroyed. He was a member of the Church, commissioned to build God's Church both in number and in stature. If we truly know Jesus (after the Spirit, not merely in the ordinary human way after the flesh), the way we see other people is transformed too. They are all the children of God, made in His image, for whom Christ died.

Jesus, my shepherd, brother,
friend,
my Prophet, Priest, and King,
my Lord, my Life, my Way, my

End,
accept the praise I bring.

February 14th (St Valentine)

II Corinthians 5 v17

There is a joy in falling in love. If it works out right, a relationship with someone with whom you have fallen in love is transformative. You become a different person when you share your life with another person. A man becomes a husband, a woman a wife. Maybe, they become parents. Huge changes. You become quite a different person from what you might have been if you had remained single. Romantic love and marriage are not for everyone. Sometimes marriages go badly wrong and are more destructive than supportive. We are only human and, if you expect a perfect marriage, you are bound to be disillusioned. The only perfect Man Who ever lived never married. You can remain single and live a fulfilled life if that is your vocation. But marriage *is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency*, and is probably the calling of most people. How much more transformative then is our union with Christ in Baptism!

February 15th

II Corinthians 5 v18

signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of Saint Paul to be honourable among all men. I thought it would be good to read on a bit in the marriage service. Marriage, blessed by God, commended by St Paul, signifies that mystical union that is betwixt Christ and His Church. The two become one. A Christian marriage is a union of two persons. Even more profoundly, the relationship between a believer in Christ is a union of two persons. We all (not just nuns!) are, as Christians, in a sense married to Christ. We are therefore one with Him and with the Father and with the Holy Spirit and we are one with one another. The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. She is the Bride of Christ. Humanity has estranged itself from its Lord by sin – by worshipping the false gods of self-centredness. But God has reconciled Himself to us in Christ and has entrusted the Church with this ministry of reconciliation to the whole world.

1 The Church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
she is his new creation
by water and the Word.
From heav'n he came and
sought her
to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought
her,
and for her life he died.

2 Elect from ev'ry nation,
yet one o'er all the earth;
her charter of salvation:
one Lord, one faith, one birth.
One holy name she blesses,
partakes one holy food,
and to one hope she presses,
with ev'ry grace endued.

February 16th

II Corinthians 5 v19

There are in the Church missionaries and evangelists. The apostolic ministry continues in those called to lead the Church and to take leading roles in the proclamation of the Gospel. There are clergy and lay ministers. There are Sunday School teachers and leaders of house groups. We pray that God will raise up many to serve in these particular vocations to preach and to teach the Gospel both to the world and the Church. But it is a vocation which all Christians share – to proclaim the Gospel of God by being the people we are.