

Chronicles



Bible Notes January - March 2008

50p

January 1st:

1 Chronicles 1 vv 1-4

The two biblical books of Chronicles are not the best known books in the Bible. They tell much the same story as 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings. They begin with a long list of names. Samuel and Kings are thought to have been written closer to the time of the events recorded and are sometimes thought therefore to be more accurate. Moreover Samuel and Kings come from the prophetic tradition in Israel, whereas Chronicles are more priestly. From c1850 - c1970, Biblical Studies departments were dominated by the liberal protestant tradition, which found the prophetic more congenial than the catholic or evangelical. These departments trained the men who were clergy when you and I were young and the people who devised the lectionaries which fix our readings in Church. So poor old Chronicles got neglected until just recently. We have four gospels telling the story of Jesus from different perspectives, because no one person could comprehend the whole. It is good that Chronicles gives us a perspective on the History of Israel – Salvation History – different from that of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.

January 2nd

1 Chronicles 1 vv 1-4

Back to Adam! In 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, besieged and captured the city of Jerusalem for the second time. The temple and much of the city were destroyed. A large number of the middle and upper classes were taken as captives to Babylon, leaving the rest of the population to cope in a ruined city and a war-ravaged countryside. The Bible interprets these events as being the result of the Jews' failure to keep God's Law in that they worshipped false gods and did not treat other people justly or mercifully. We might well reflect on what happens to a society which is contemptuous of God, greedy, selfish and uncaring about other people. Despite the fact that the Bible believes that what happened in 597 was what they deserved, the Bible is equally adamant that God does not give up on His people. He does not desire the death of the wicked, but rather that they should repent and live. Some decades later, under the providence of God, the exiles are allowed to return from Babylon and rebuild their city and their nation and the Temple of God. Chronicles is the story of the foundation on which they re-build.

I promise you that we will get beyond these verses today. One of the big questions for the returning exiles is the question of identity. Who are the true Jews, the people of God? Is it the exiles who kept faith and are now returning to rebuild the Temple of the LORD? Is it the people who were left living in the Holy Land, who seem to have achieved very little by way of reconstruction? What Nebuchadnezzar destroyed was the southern part of Israel – Judah. The northern kingdom had been defeated by the Assyrians a hundred or so years before that. Did the remnants of the North have a place in the new Israel? What about the “foreign” people whose ancestors the Assyrians had compulsorily settled in Northern Israel, the mixture which would eventually become known as the Samaritans? What did it mean to be Jewish? Who owned the land, the people whose ancestors had had it forcefully taken away from their families or the people who had lived on it and tended it for a couple of generations? One of the reasons for the interest in genealogy is to establish racial and familial identity. Who belongs? Who owns what? You could ask the same questions today about land taken over by Jews from Arab families who fled after various C20 wars in modern Israel or people who now own, having bought in good faith, art objects which, it turns out, were looted from Jewish families by the Nazis.

We are facing similar questions in C21 Britain. In the reign of the first Queen Elizabeth, it was established that we were an independent nation in our own right, united (despite our mixed origins as Normans, Vikings or Saxons), Christians, members of the Church of England. We maintained social cohesion by taking various more or less severe measures against those who did not conform to the national Church and our laws and customs. There have always been influxes of immigrants in English history, some more welcome than others. There has always been dissent and, in time, dissent came to be tolerated. Roman Catholics, Jews, atheists, etc were progressively allowed to take public office and to stand for parliament. It remained an Anglican Establishment, however, and non-conformists and dissidents of all stripes were tolerated, rather than treated as complete equals. In the last few decades, however, we have lost confidence in our ability to apprehend absolute truth. We find it hard to say that Roman Catholics,

Moslems or atheists are wrong. We rightly recoil from the idea of heresy trials, witch hunts or the persecution of political opponents. There have been substantial migrations into this country of populations with very different beliefs and customs from those traditionally practised by English people. We are told that we live in a multicultural society. The Government actively promotes diversity, but also wants social cohesion. So, we are asking ourselves what it means to be British? Are you British because you were born here? British because your ancestors were born here? British because you chose to live here? British because you are accepted by the British Government as being British? British because you are white? British because you are a member of the Church of England? British because you hold certain common British values and, if so, what are the common values you have to share if you want to be labelled as British?

The answers in Chronicles and the related Books of Ezra and Nehemiah may sometimes seem quite exclusive in their definitions of who belongs. But it is interesting that the whole story starts with Adam. We start with our common humanity. We are all descendants of Adam (whom St Luke describes as son of God). That membership of Adam, our common humanity, must be fundamental in our decisions regarding who belongs, who is part of our family or tribe or nation. Whatever differences there may be, whatever loyalties we may owe because of blood ties, patriotism, common interests, race, faith or whatever, underlying all our relationships is our common humanity. That is why Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan in response to the lawyer's question, *Who is my neighbour?* Our beginning is in the first Adam and our end – the end of all humanity – is in the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

January 4th

1 Chronicles 4 vv 9 & 10

Read through all the names if you like. Perhaps you should. They are sacred Scripture even if you and I find the names hard to pronounce and the lists befuddling. I picked out these two verses, however, because they say something personal about a name in the list. These are not just names. They are real people, with real lives and a personal history as precious to them and their families as our lives are precious to us.

January 5th

1 Chronicles 4 vv 21-23

Here is a note you don't get in the Joshua, Judges, Samuel version. We hear a lot today about Polish plumbers. In the past, different immigrant groups have brought particular skills to this country. Particular families have followed particular trades, passing them down from father to son. The people mentioned here obviously had a remembered special role in affairs of state and trade.

January 6th

1 Chronicles 6 vv 31-48

I don't suppose you'll be asked to do this reading in church! What is going on here is that Chronicles is making clear who is allowed to minister in the Temple and who is responsible for the worship. Levi was one of the tribes of Israel. Moses belonged to that tribe and the Levites had a special role as ministers from the time of the Exodus onwards. Chronicles tells us that, although it was David's son Solomon who built the Temple, David himself got everything ready, including making certain families responsible for public worship in perpetuity.

I wrote above that liberal protestant scholars preferred the prophetic tradition. What matters is to act justly and mercifully. Unless you treat other people right, taking part in acts of worship is hypocrisy. That is quite true. Jesus Himself says as much.

Nevertheless, there is also the need for heartfelt worship. Whether it is the fervent hymn-singing of the evangelical or the beautiful ceremonial of the Catholic or Orthodox, religion is not just about being good; it is about worshipping God!

However, humanity is fallen. Even our religion becomes tainted and twisted so that we are hypocrites, worshipping gods of our own invention, remaking God in an image of our own devising, pretending to love the Father, while abusing His children. Religious fervour needs to be directed or else it may become a force for evil. If everyone does his own thing, it is not long before the religious community is taken over by what is much less than God. We need properly trained leaders, recognised as being called of God.

January 7th

1 Chronicles 6 v49

Aaron was Moses' brother. Aaron's descendants, out of all the Levites, were selected to be high priests. They were the ones who entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to offer the sacrifice that would take away the sins of all the people. Christians of course know that Jesus fulfilled on the Cross what generations of Aaron's descendants had only prefigured. Jesus is the true high priest and He offers Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

In Christ, we are all priests and kings and we offer Him our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.

January 8th

1 Chronicles 10 vv 1-14

The narrative in Chronicles begins with the death of Saul. Saul is usually regarded as the first King of Israel. Before Saul's time, there seems to have been little central government in Israel. There were the tribes with their own ways of dealing with things. There were local judges, who ruled in particular localities. Sometimes there was a judge over all Israel. In theory, the King of Israel was God. All the tribes and families were supposed to regulate their affairs according to His Law. This was interpreted by the priests. From time to time, prophets were sent to point out where they were going wrong! The Israelites were different from the nations of Canaan, who had their own kings and lived in their city states, worshipping local variations of the god Baal.

Getting a king made the Israelites like the nations. In some ways, this was good thing, giving them unity and more efficient government. In other ways it was a bad thing. Power is always open to abuse. The people of God were not supposed to be like the nations. They were supposed to be distinct and different. Getting a king was compromising with the way of the world. Always a question for the religious individual or the religious community. How far do we compromise with the ways of the world in which we have to live and how far do we remain holy (separate)?

Saul was a sort of foreword to the story of the Israelite monarchy. Obviously he did not inherit the throne. He was chosen by the prophet

and by popular acclaim. So long as he walked with God, things went well, but when he turned away from God, both the king and the kingdom became more and more degraded until he was reduced to consulting a medium. The result was the end of Saul and any dynasty he might have established and a new beginning in David.

January 9th

I Chronicles 11 vv 1-9

For all the importance of David, Chronicles abbreviates his history tremendously. The events of these verses took place over many years. The point is that David was a faithful king. He acknowledged God as his father. Despite all his faults, he attempted to live a good life. He unified Israel with its own capital city, Jerusalem, and he established the main centre of the worship of the LORD in the same place as the centre of government. He prefigures Jesus as the good king, who is a loyal son of God, a faithful shepherd of his people and a symbol of unity between peoples and between his subjects and God.

January 10th

I Chronicles 11 vv 15-19

David is a powerful symbol. But he is also a human being. He evidently inspired great personal loyalty, as this story shows. After all these centuries, there is still a terrific human warmth in this incident.

January 11th

I Chronicles 13 vv 1-14

Moses made the Ark of the Covenant during the Exodus. It was made according to the pattern God showed Moses when he was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. The Ark signified the presence of God among His people and its design taught important lessons about the relationship between God and His people. No image can describe Him. He is approached with awe, with penitence and love. Only our best is good enough for God and, even so, we only offer Him back what He has given us. God is approached through sacrifice. In the time of Samuel, the Philistines had captured the Ark. Now David and the Israelites wanted it back – the symbol of a people united under God. But holy things are not ours to treat as we please. They are God's and we imperil ourselves if we lose our sense of awe. We serve God. God does not serve our ends.

January 12th

I Chronicles 14 vv 1-17

David's power is recognised. The King of Tyre sends him the materials to make his palace. Later, the wood for the Temple will also come from Tyre, as will many of the craftsmen who build it. The words for "temple" and "palace" are the same in Hebrew. God is the King. The king is his viceroy. We see David established in power in that he takes more wives. He is, after all, a middle eastern potentate! The Philistines (who lived in five towns along the Mediterranean coast) got worried about David's growing power and decided to make a pre-emptive strike. David turned to God for guidance. That is what we have to do when we have got problems. God guided David and brought him through his troubles. They even burnt the Philistine idols as a symbol of Who is the true and living God. It is worth considering that, while we should respect other people's beliefs and their right to hold them, there is such a thing as truth and falsehood in religion. Fundamentalist suicide bombers are just the latest reminder that one belief is not just as good as any other and that religious people have to contend (always charitably!) for the Truth.

January 13th

I Chronicles 15 v11

You need to read between the lines a bit here. Abiathar was the priest who ministered in Israel before David captured Jerusalem and made it the centre of government and worship. Zadok was probably already there, functioning as high priest and, possibly, as king as well. Jerusalem had a long history of priest-kings, long before it became an Israelite city. One of these was Melchizedek in the time of Abraham. Another was Adonizedek. Note the similarity in the names. They all contain that ZDK, which means righteous. In the New Testament, Jesus is seen as fulfilling everything that Melchizedek was: high priest, king of righteousness, king of peace, the one who offered Abraham, the father of us all, bread and wine and received Abraham's offering of tithes, Abraham's acknowledgement of the validity of his priesthood. You and I approach God through the sacrifice of Jesus the High Priest. He is our King, reigning in righteousness and peace, requiring the same of all His subjects. We acknowledge Him as our priest, when we offer our tithes as a symbol of the offering of our whole lives, while He offers us Himself in the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion.

January 14th

I Chronicles 15 vv 25-29

David, it seems, gets carried away in his enthusiasm for God. Michal, his wife and the daughter of his predecessor, despises him. People speak of the “cultured despisers of religion”. It is not hard to find reasons to despise religious people, religious practices or even religion itself. But it is perilous to despise. If there is no God, if the universe exists by chance, our lives mean nothing. They are worthless. If other people are sincerely seeking after God, we dishonour God if we despise them.

January 15th

I Chronicles 16 vv 1-3

The best way to get people to come to a weekday service for, say, Ascension Day or Michaelmas, is to lay on refreshments afterwards. That can seem a bit cynical. Certainly, there is something wrong if people are only sitting through a sermon and a Eucharist because there are free food and drink afterwards. However sharing food, sharing the good things God has given us as part of our celebration has a long and honourable pedigree. So let's indeed have refreshments, meals even, after our services. But don't let's lose sight of what is the most important part of the celebration.

January 16th

I Chronicles 16 vv 7-36

You might recognise a lot of this because most of it is in common with various psalms from the Book of Psalms. What I want to note is the spirit of celebration. God is marvellous. He has done wonderful things. He is active in the world today. He does care for us. He has prepared for us a home in heaven. Our faith is something to celebrate!

January 17th

I Chronicles 16 vv 37-43

Various people were appointed to minister in the sanctuary. There were daily sacrifices to be offered. There were communal feasts to organise. There was singing and incense and music. But it was all faithfully offered to God. Part of the community's duty was to provide ministers to offer worship all the time. I am sorry to say that we have lost that sense of ministering to God. The Christian minister is all too often seen as someone who puts on acts of worship for the benefit of his congregation. His success or failure as a minister is measured in terms

of the numbers who attend, whether they find the experience helpful, even whether they enjoy it. In fact the task of the Christian minister is to worship God. Sometimes (ordinary weekdays for example) he may worship and pray alone or with a very few people. On other occasions (Sundays and other major festivals) he may worship with a much larger number of people. His task, however, is to worship and to provide other people with the opportunity to worship. The focus is on God. The minister and the people are met together to worship God. The people are not there to have the minister do something for them.

I am always amused by the following exchange which allegedly took place after a service.

Man in pew: Didn't think much of your prayers today, Vicar.

Vicar: Well I wasn't talking to you!

January 18th

I Chronicles 17 vv 1-15

This is such an important section! David's enthusiasm for God makes him want to build God a splendid Temple. Also (and we all sometimes have mixed motives) he wants to consolidate his kingdom by linking his government with the national religion in one place. Maybe (perhaps unconsciously) he is thinking to control God and use Him for his own purposes. The prophet Nathan is told by God to remind David that God does not need a Temple. He had always been with His people, a fact symbolised by having the Ark of the Covenant designed to be portable and to be carried about wherever they went. God is always with His people and He sets the agenda. He is not confined within a state cult, an instrument of social control. Instead of David building God a house, God will establish David's house (his family). Nevertheless, despite all the reservations, there is a need for a temple at that time just as there was a need for a king, despite the caveats we considered on 8th. In time, Jesus will fulfil all the requirements of temple and king. He is the place where we meet God. He is the symbol and inspiration of our essential unity with one another and with God. He is our ruler, our judge, our protector, our shepherd. Jesus is the sacrifice and the priests and, in Him, we are priests and kings, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and a living sacrifice.

January 19th

I Chronicles 17 vv 16-27

David is humble before God. He is amazed that God has chosen him and made him what he is. David is astounded that God has chosen Israel and done so much for them. God is marvellous. David is overwhelmed that he has a hand in serving God, in building this temple and establishing the kingdom. He hopes and prays that his humble efforts will contribute to God's glory and inspire everybody to praise God with him.

Do we feel the same? Is it amazing that God has chosen us? Is it a wonderful privilege to share in the worship and work of His Church? Do we long for our humble contribution to contribute to His glory and to inspire others to praise God? Or do we think that God is rather lucky that we find time for Him in our busy schedules when most people don't bother? Do we feel that it is good of us to put some of our money in the collection and give some of our time to Christian work? Do we expect to be honoured, thanked by the vicar, made much of because of what we do for the Church? It is so easy to get completely caught up in business (and busyness) of keeping a church going in C21 that we don't have time to reflect and realise that David was right! This is a shame because David's way builds magnificent temples, whereas C21 English Christians struggle for their churches to survive. As the psalmist says: *Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchmen waketh but in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.* (Ps 127 vv 1&2).

January 20th

I Chronicles 21 vv 1-17

We've got used to the idea of a census every ten years. Government records ever more information about us. By and large we think this is a good thing. It enables government to plan how many homes, hospitals, jobs, schools, etc are required. We tend to assume that Government is benign and that it will use all this information about us for our own good. But knowledge is also power. Power corrupts. An evil government could use all this information against us. Even a benign government may want to take away our personal responsibility and freedom, to force us to give up smoking, eat healthily etc. Government

may come to treat us as though we were its children, even as though it owned us. To me the planned requirement to have an identity card is a statement that I only live my life in this country by licence from the Government. The Israelites were free under God. They were not vassals of the state. They belonged to God, not to the king. This is why taking a census was regarded as such a terrible sin. For what it is worth, my opinion is that it is legitimate for a benign government to collect information about its citizens for the individual and the common good, but (especially in the age of the computer and the surveillance camera) we must make Government justify every intrusion it wants to make into our privacy and we must be wary of the various excuses it makes for demanding ever more powers of surveillance and regulation. Benjamin Franklin said that those who surrender liberty for security deserve neither security nor liberty.

January 21st

I Chronicles 21 vv 18-30

The end of the census story is that David is shown where to build the temple – on Ornan's threshing floor. A threshing floor would be regarded in some sense as a sacred place, a place in which to give thanks for the harvest, to dedicate it to God, to share it with family and neighbours, to pray that it will last through the Winter and for good crops next year. These mysterious events surrounding the census indicate God's choice for the location of His temple. I think we too need to involve God in our planning. Does He want you to live in that house? Does He want me to do this job? Is it right for us to get married? We are not deists, believing in a God Who created the Universe aeons ago and now watches it from a distance. We are theists, believing in a God Who is active and imminent in His creation. We ought to commend our humdrum every day activities to Him, to thank Him for what happens each day, to confess to Him our daily sins, to seek His guidance in all the decisions we have to take, not just the religious ones. God is not an optional add on to our lives. He is the essence of our existence.

January 22nd

I Chronicles 22 vv 1-11

David doesn't get to build the house, but he is determined to do everything he can towards building it. He gets everything ready and

tells the young Solomon what he has got to do. Given all the stories about David's battles and how the LORD has helped him to defeat his enemies, it is interesting to note that he is not allowed to build the house because he has shed so much blood. Solomon's name means "peace" and it is the man of peace who will build the temple. War is sometimes a necessary evil, even for good people, but it remains an evil and defiles the land. We might have to wage war, but we cannot glory in war and we always pray for peace and strive for what we pray for.

January 23rd

I Chronicles 22 vv 12-19

David has done everything he can to help Solomon. He asks everybody else to co-operate with Solomon as well. What matters most, however, is that God gives Solomon wisdom, and so David prays, and that Solomon takes care to fulfil the statutes and judgments of the LORD. If God works with him and he with God he can be strong and of good courage and neither dread nor be dismayed. So we look for support in what we do both in the church and in our lives in the outside world. We are grateful for the help and co-operation we receive. What matters most, however, is that we seek God's wisdom in prayer and that we try, by God's grace, to live according to God's commandments. Then we needn't worry about anything. But if we sideline God in our lives, if we sideline God in the life of our Church, all our plans will come to nothing, no matter how much support we think we have.

January 24th

I Chronicles 23 vv 30-32

The Levites offered sacrifices of thanksgiving every day, morning and evening. They kept the weekly Sabbath, the monthly festival at the new moon and the three great annual feasts – Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. All time belongs to the eternal God and we live in the context of the time which He created. Our church services follow a similar pattern, with daily morning and evening prayer, the Sunday celebration of the resurrection, the yearly feasts of Christmas and Easter. The ministers maintain the offering of worship and everybody is invited to take part in it. If you do, you glorify God, you align your life with God's life, you proclaim His glory to the world. But maybe you'd rather clean the car!

January 25th

I Chronicles 28 vv 1-21

Be strong and of good courage, and do it: fear not nor be dismayed: for the LORD God, even my God, will be with thee.

All this must have been very daunting for the young Solomon. All those ministers and choristers assembled, all those leading citizens, the piles of building materials, the treasure gathered together, all ready for him to complete his father's great project, the final and most splendid offering of the much-respected, most venerable King of Israel. Solomon must have been tempted to feel that it was all beyond him. I guess you feel like that sometimes. I know I do! But you can do the good works God has prepared for you to do. If God wants you to do something, you can do it. It might not be easy, but you can.

January 26th

I Chronicles 29 vv 1-19

David himself gives all these treasures for the House of the LORD. All the people give as much as they can afford to make the house as magnificent as possible. And David prays a prayer which we still sometimes use at the Offertory in our own Holy Communion services.

All things come of thee and of thine own have we given thee.

Worth thinking about when we consider how much to put in the collection plate. But, again, I suspect we look at it the wrong way round. We look at the human. What can we as individuals afford? How much does the church actually need? If we aren't careful, passing the plate round is just one aspect of our fund-raising, no more sacred than holding a jumble sale. David speaks of his joy that God's people offer willingly such an abundance of precious things. He prays that they will always feel like this (which of course most of us don't most of the time). What we put in the plate should be based not on what we feel we must give if our church is to survive but on an exuberant love which cannot help but express itself in giving generously and abundantly. If you tell me that your generous abundant offering would be better going to charity or missionary work than being spent on conserving mediaeval buildings and funding church bureaucracy, I agree that we have something worthwhile to discuss. The point, however, is abundant generosity to God.

January 27th

I Chronicles 29 vv 20-30

Now bless the LORD your God.

Pentecostals and charismatics do it. Old fashioned evangelicals do it. Catholics and Orthodox do it. Worship focuses on God. But desperate parish churches try to please people in the hope that they will spare the Church a little of their valuable time, talents and money. Those embarrassed by God-talk, talk instead about social responsibility. Those who don't really feel that God acts in the world try to make people feel good and be good.

It's all the wrong way round. It is worship that makes us feel good, worship that makes us want to be good, authentic worship that makes us socially responsible, worship that inspires to share our faith and to build God's Church. Until the Church of England accepts at every level that everything starts with worship, she is doomed to do no more than manage decline.

January 28th

II Chronicles 1 vv 1-12

Solomon was not perfect – at least by the standards of later days. This is why there is all this elaborate explanation about why he was worshipping at Gibeon. I Kings 3 doesn't worry so much about it. But the Chronicler is trying very hard to tell the people of his own day – those who have returned from exile in Babylon – that they must worship only in the Jerusalem temple. Other shrines were places where people worshipped idols or where wrong ideas about the LORD and what He required were disseminated. So he needs to explain in some detail what Solomon was doing worshipping at Gibeon. What Solomon asks God for, however, is wisdom. It is what he needs; it is what he becomes famous for. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Christ Himself is the *wisdom and power of God*. Sacred stuff, wisdom.

January 29th

II Chronicles 1 vv 13-17

Some big American churches preach a success gospel. The idea is that, if you are a good Christian, God will make you prosper in everything. You'll be rich. You won't get sick. Your family will prosper. This "success gospel" ignores what Jesus says about riches. It ignores the vast number of Christians whose faithfulness to Christ has ended in

martyrdom. It makes people who get ill or whose children go off the rails or who lose their jobs think that they must be being punished for something. All this is obviously very wrong. It is true, however, as we see in this reading that living by God's Law tends to make a society peaceful and prosperous. If we act wisely (i.e. in accordance with Christ, the wisdom and power of God) we live fulfilled and useful lives. Honesty, generosity, a reluctance to use violence all contribute to a prosperous and stable society. But they do not guarantee prosperity or stability. Indeed too much prosperity may tempt people to a materialistic greed which eventually destroys the stable society that made prosperity possible. A willingness to accept poverty or even martyrdom may be a prerequisite of establishing a just society.

January 30th

II Chronicles 2 vv 3-6

There is a great deal in Chronicles about the magnificent temple and all its wonderful furnishings. What Solomon does not, however, lose sight of is that God is not going to be contained in any temple. Heaven and earth cannot contain Him. In fact, He encompasses Heaven and earth and then there is infinitely more. God is everywhere and in everything and everything exists in Him. So our church buildings are places where we gather for worship or pray alone, but they do not contain God. Our care of these buildings may form part of our worship. But we could do without them. They must not become idols so that the conservation of ancient monuments sucks in all our energy and resources, energy and resources which ought to be devoted to the work of establishing God's Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace. Neither should we think that we are any less in the presence of God on the bus or in the office or even in a prison cell or a hospital than we are when we are in a church building.

January 31st

II Chronicles 3 vv 1&2

When I first visited Jerusalem, our Jewish guide led me out of sight of the Moslem custodians of the mosque, which now stands on the temple site, down some steps to show me the bare rock under the ornate floor where Abraham was stopped from sacrificing Isaac centuries before the time of Solomon. This is a very special place for Jews, Christians and Moslems. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

1st February

II Chronicles 3 vv 8-14

The temple basically consists of three chambers: the porch, the holy place and the most holy place. As things develop, the holy place becomes the place where Jewish men, Levites and their priests perform most of the worship, while the outer areas will be for women and gentiles. The holy of holies, or most holy place, is where the high priest alone enters once a year on the Day of Atonement. I thought you would like to read what it was like. Cherubim are animal-like winged beings which are thought of as supporting the Throne of God. The holy of holies is kept separate from the rest of the temple by the veil. All this prefigures and symbolises Christ our high priest offering Himself as a sacrifice in the heavenly sanctuary. When Jesus dies on the cross, the veil is torn in two, showing that we all have access to God in Christ.

2nd February

II Chronicles 5 vv 1-10

The temple is completed and the Ark of the Covenant, which symbolises the presence of God with His people, is placed in the holy of holies. It is not an image or an idol. It is not something to worship in itself. It does not contain any representation of God. Solomon's temple is similar in many ways to contemporary religious buildings. Plenty of cities had shrines not unlike Solomon's temple, but they all contained images of their gods. The Hebrews knew better. God cannot be represented by or as anything made by human beings. He made us. What the Ark did contain was the two stone tablets which God gave Moses with the Ten Commandments on them. These signify the covenant that God will be their God and that they will be God's people and the commandments set out humanity's duties under that covenant to God. In Solomon's day, the covenant is between God and the people of Israel. In our day, the day of Jesus Christ, the covenant is between God and everyone of every race and nation. All people have to do in order to join the people of God is to repent and to be baptised.

3rd February

II Chronicles 5 vv 11-14

Everybody wants to take part, not just those on the duty roster for that day. The glory of God fills the house and, despite all their preparations, they are unable to stand before Him. Every Sunday God is present in worship meetings. Where's the urgency to be there? Where's the awe?

4th February

II Chronicles 6 vv 1&2

The Orthodox and the Catholics try to emulate this magnificence in their religious buildings and liturgy. Protestants tend to go for something plainer. We tend to feel that Christ has fulfilled all the demands of the sacrificial system and that all this ritual and splendour is unnecessary. We also tend to feel that the money would be better spent on charity than on fine buildings, vestments etc. We stress that God dwells in people rather than in buildings and that a loving heart means more to Him than expensive vestments. Not that we are consistent. If I said that, from now on, I would close the church buildings and preside at the Holy Communion in halls or homes, wearing shorts and tee shirt and not bothering with the ceremonies of the Church of England, I guess that there would be an enormous outcry how ever obvious it was that I was worshipping God in spirit and in truth and inviting others to do the same.

What I want to ask, however, is this. If we say that we New Testament people do not need all these outward forms because worship is a matter for the heart, do we experience deep heart-felt worship, more wonderful than anything Solomon could have experienced, or are we essentially indifferent to the spiritual, disregarding not only the outward forms of worship, but also the inner truths which they are designed to signify?

5th February

II Chronicles 6 vv 12-17

I'm not sure how much of this you want to read. By all means, read all of it. It is magnificent, though I am afraid that some of you will find it repetitive. The temple is at last complete. The Ark of the Covenant has been placed in the holy of holies. Now King Solomon dedicates the temple in this tremendous public prayer in front of all the people. He prays that God will fulfil His promise to David about his descendants reigning for ever. What strikes me is that God answers Solomon's prayer in a way more wonderful than Solomon could ever have imagined. David's descendant will be King of Kings, the dwelling place of the Spirit of God, high priest and atoning sacrifice. Through His act of at-one-ment, all peoples of the world will be incorporate in His mystical body, priest, kings, a living sacrifice. The dwelling place of God.

6th February

II Chronicles 6 vv 18-21

We are perhaps used to the idea that there is a world we can see and touch, a world our bodies inhabit, a world of time and space, and that there is another realm, a spiritual realm, which we cannot touch, where time and space are non-existent, the dwelling place of angels and archangels and the souls of just men made perfect, a realm where we can conceive of God having His Throne. How would those two realms relate? How would it possible for us to break through into the eternal or for the eternal to break through to us? The only possible answer is that God makes it possible. God deigns to hear our prayers. He deigns to reveal to us something of the mysteries of His Word. He deigns to be born as one of us, to suffer and to die for us and to rise again for us. He deigns to be present in our worship, to manifest Himself in the Bread and Wine of the Holy Eucharist and to live in our hearts in the person of the Holy Spirit. This is not something to be taken for granted.

7th February

II Chronicles 6 vv 22-31

Solomon takes it for granted that God is just. Justice in our relationships with other human beings depends on the justice of God. In the end, we get what we deserve. If we burn up all the oil in an orgy of unnecessary car journeys, we will destroy our planet's ecosystem. How do we put an end to war and famine and environmental degradation? We repent of the sins which make us fight, the sins which make us greedy. Hard to do, but, thankfully we are not on our own. If we confess our sins to God, not only will He forgive us, but also He will help us to sort out the mess we have made.

8th February

II Chronicles 6 vv 32-35

People in England sometimes speak as if Christianity were the white man's religion. Ours, it is implied, is a Christian culture and all these coloured immigrants are spoiling it. There is always a tendency to confuse race, culture and religion, to identify particular religions with particular people or particular places. Our God, however, is the God of all the earth. People of all races are welcome to pray to Him and He hears them. We should be delighted to share the Christian faith with immigrant communities. Likewise, we can pray to God wherever we find ourselves in the world and in whatever circumstances.

9th February

II Chronicles 6 vv 36-39

This part of the prayer is very poignant for the people Chronicles is written for. Their parents and grandparents had fallen away from God. They had worshipped idols – gold and silver. They had believed that they could treat God any way they pleased and He would still look after them. They had cheated their customers, bullied their labourers, ill-treated immigrants and neglected the poor. As a result, the Babylonians had come and destroyed the city they thought was so wonderful and Solomon's temple in which they had trusted. Their pride had been utterly crushed. And then, exiles in a foreign land, they had repented and God had brought them home. Now was the opportunity to rebuild and make a new start. God would hear their prayers. We British have neglected God. We neglect the Church. We worship money, power and celebrity. We think we are invincible and we put our trust in political systems, alliances and weapons systems instead of God. We are charitable, but our charity is strictly limited especially when it comes to foreigners. There is far too much violence on our streets. Official statements all too often turn out to be untrue. Increasingly we are not allowed to proclaim the Word of God as found in the Bible because the Bible is not fully in accord with the Government's plans for a multicultural, inclusive, diverse society. Where is it all leading? Will we repent in time? When we repent, God will save us, but the repentance has to be genuine and heartfelt.

10th February

II Chronicles 6 vv 40-42

Arise O Lord into thy resting place is very likely to be a line used in a regular service at the temple. These sonorous phrases come up time and again in the liturgy over hundreds and even thousands of years. We still say *Endue thy ministers with righteousness and make thy chosen people joyful* in Morning and Evening Prayer, a slightly different translation of v41. Relating the eternal to the time bound, the infinite to the space-limited, God to man. Special buildings, special places, special words, special rituals do all have a place in opening our hearts to God. We must neither allow them to become mere rituals, words or actions repeated without thought as to what they mean, not to discard them casually so that the baby of eternal significance is thrown out with the bathwater of traditional practices.

11th February

II Chronicles 7 vv 1-11

Such a God demands our best. Solomon was in awe of God. And we ought to be more so. Nearly 3,000 years of geographical exploration and scientific research have taught us that the universe is much more wonderful than Solomon could possibly have known. Solomon was awestruck that the God he knew had made the world as he knew it. Knowing that the world is so much more wonderful, we know that God is much more wonderful. Nearly 3,000 years of philosophical inquiry and theological reflection have taught us far more about the nature of ultimate reality than Solomon could ever have imagined. Our appreciation of God can only be very slight compared with what there is of God to appreciate, but it is much more than Solomon's. And then we have Jesus. God the Son deigns to become one of us, to share our life, to die for us, to rise again. We have far more reasons than Solomon to know that God is great.

12th February

II Chronicles 7 vv 12-22

God promises Solomon that He will hear his prayer and keep His promises. But He warns that the Davidic monarchy and the Jerusalem Temple will not survive if the people are not faithful to God. The last verse should chill us. When, in future times, people look at the ruins of the temple and ask what has happened, the answer will be that everything precious to them has been destroyed because they forsook the LORD.

13th February

II Chronicles 8 vv 7-10

When Solomon has consolidated his power, he taxes the non-Israelites still living in the land of Canaan and compels them to work as bond labourers, but, at least at this stage, the Israelites are treated as freemen. In the Law of Moses, the Israelites are told to *Love your neighbour as yourself*. This was generally taken to mean *Love your brother Israelite as yourself* which left you free to treat non-Israelites less generously. We all naturally treat our families more favourably than other people, then people like us (our tribes), then people who share our nationality. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus teaches that the stranger or foreigner is also the neighbour, within the meaning of the Act.

14th February

II Chronicles 9 vv 1-12

On this St Valentine's Day, you might be thinking of those films and stories which suggest a romance between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Bible does not say that this was the case – though it does allow that Solomon had many wives and concubines. Some of whom led him astray by their adherence to pagan religions. The point of this story really is that Solomon was praised by foreign potentates, including those from mysterious distant countries.

Just as an aside, isn't it odd how we feel we have to give valuable presents to rich people who do not really need anything and give cheap presents to poor people who would really appreciate something nice?

15th February

II Chronicles 9 vv 13-31

David's is the most glorious reign in terms of fidelity to God, but Solomon was the richest Israelite king ever. In his time, there were peace and prosperity. However, it doesn't last into the next reign. The seeds of decay are already present in Solomon's reign. He has become corrupted by compromising with the religions of some of his foreign wives and, as we shall see, he has overtaxed and exploited people to the point where they no longer want his government to continue.

Pious Christians used to advise young people in the churches only to marry other church members. St Paul writes about the danger of being "unequally yoked" of having the two most important things in your life – your God and your husband or wife – pulling in different directions. Nowadays we would no more dare to suggest that Christians should marry Christians than we would dare to suggest that they shouldn't sleep together before they are married. But how often is it the case that a person's church commitment is undermined by a non-practising or even non-believing family? When one person in the family wants to go to church and another wants to go shopping or do sport or something, why is it always the one who wants to go to church who gives in? Have we no confidence in what we stand for?

16th February

II Chronicles 10 vv 1-17

At this stage, succession was not automatic, father to son. The people could reject the heir apparent, just as the British Parliament rejected James II and passed laws excluding members of the royal family from the succession in certain circumstances. Jeroboam was an officer under Solomon. Chronicles does not explain, but I Kings 11 does. The prophet Ahijah had taught Jeroboam that he would become ruler of the greater part of Solomon's Kingdom because, under Solomon, too many of the people had become idolaters.

Note that there is still loyalty to Solomon. People do not really, at this stage, want a change of government. They just want Rehoboam to treat them fairly. Probably Solomon had grown arrogant with all those years of effectively absolute power. His older counsellors remembered better times and advised Rehoboam to behave more like David and the young Solomon. But the younger counsellors had grown up in an atmosphere of unchallenged power. They advised Rehoboam to ignore the people's complaints – with the result that the kingdom was both divided and weakened. It would never again return to the splendour of Solomon and David and eventually both northern and southern kingdoms would fall respectively to the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

Coincidentally, I have just been listening to a bit of *Any Questions* in which two members of the panel said they would refuse to register for identity cards, being willing to go to prison if necessary. In this country, we have a long and valuable tradition of respect for authority. Generally speaking, we obey the laws we don't like just because they are the law. It is good and right that we do. If people generally don't respect the law, first you get anarchy and then you get tyranny as people cry out for a strong man to sort out the mess anarchy inevitably generates. We do not, however, give government limitless jurisdiction. There is a risk that a party may get so used to governing virtually unopposed that they become arrogant and push people further than they are willing to go. That would potentially be a very dangerous situation and our leaders have to remember that ultimately they govern under God and with our consent.

February 17th

II Chronicles 10 vv 18&19

If you claim authority, you have to be able to enforce it. Collecting taxes is one thing government can do that private citizen's can't. So it only became clear that Rehoboam no longer ruled the north when the northerners refused to pay their taxes.

February 18th

II Chronicles 11 vv 1-4

How is power enforced? In a democracy, power is supposed to derive from the people, expressed via the ballot box. Does that mean, however, that parliament always has to do what the public seems to want, e.g. over Europe or capital punishment or immigration? Does good government seek to lead public opinion or to follow it? Most human cultures believe that power is derived from God or from a religious framework or from some secular political philosophy. Whether or not there are elections, rulers are supposed to govern in accordance with abstract but absolute principles of right and wrong. Never mind that Hitler was elected, he was still a war criminal! A cynic might say that, whatever fine theories of government we propound, in practice power is exercised by those who control the military. We saw this in Burma a few months ago. But here we see Rehoboam told by the prophet not to go to war in order to enforce his authority. The people have spoken. More importantly, God has spoken.

February 19th

II Chronicles 11 vv 5-17

The problem for Jeroboam and his successors is that Rehoboam has got David's capital and the temple which is the centre of worship for the LORD. He sets up two rival centres for worship at Bethel and Dan with two golden calves to worship. The ministers who will not go along with this join Rehoboam in Judah and it appears that some of the population now have divided loyalties, returning to Jerusalem for worship, but politically subjects of the Northern Kingdom. For centuries, being English and being Christian apparently went together. We are conscious now that many English people are effectively not religious or they are Jews, Moslems, Sikhs etc and we are very conscious that the Christian Church is far more vigorous overseas than it is here. If forced to choose, where would our loyalties lie? With the Church or the State? That's a dilemma that causes civil wars!

February 20th

II Chronicles 12 vv 1-12

When you read either the Books of Kings or the Books of Chronicles, this is the sad talk of Israel's history. People get above themselves. They think they can manage without God. They embark on some disastrous course of action. They repent. God forgives them and the whole cycle begins again. It is not just Israelite history we are talking about. It is human history. Humanity turns its back on God, Things go wrong. The world doesn't work if we don't follow the Maker's instructions. God reaches out to us in love. He sets us free from sin and death and then we take advantage of our freedom to run away from God and fall back into the clutches of sin and death. Chronicles' answer for the returning exiles was to be faithful in the practice of pure worship and to meditate on the Law. Even that could be perverted into a merely external religion of holier than thou attitudes and the appearance of faithfulness to God used to cover the reality of the ill treatment of other people. As St Peter says, we have to be vigilant against our adversary the devil who walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Just as well then that we depend on God and not ourselves in order to remain faithful.

February 21st

II Chronicles 13 vv 1-22

So are the northerners and the southerners really one people or are they not? Historians can't give a decisive answer. Judah obviously acted separately sometimes from the rest of the tribes even back in the time of David. Here the northerners are portrayed as worshipping the LORD, but not in the approved way. Jeroboam and Abijah are at war and Abijah prevails because he is on the LORD's side. They are brothers, but they are enemies. Who counts for membership of the LORD's people? One answer is that all the sons of Adam, the whole human race, are sons of God, that He cares about them and their individual destiny is in His hands. The opposite view is that only the few who are faithful to the requirements of the covenant are truly the people of God. You can see why both views are attractive. God certainly is the Lord of every nation, the creator of all humanity. Surely everybody belongs to Him. Yet most of humanity has rejected him and defiled its own humanity by worshipping idols and abusing one another. Surely only the faithful remnant have the right to be His children. In Jesus, of course, the

paradox is resolved. He is the only One Whose life is so blameless that He deserves to be a child of God, but His very blamelessness leads Him to the act of self-sacrificial love which redeems the entire human race.

A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.

February 22nd

II Chronicles 14 vv 1-5

In Sunday School and in sermons, you tend to get a very summarised History of Israel. You might be left with the impression that worship only took place in Jerusalem. In reality, if you read the Bible carefully, you see that there were always lots of hill shrines scattered around the country where people worshipped. Some of these would have been for the worship of pagan gods, some for a substandard worship of YHWH. The problem is not that people are insufficiently religious. They enjoy prostrating themselves before their idols, whether Baal and Ashtoreth or David Beckham and Kylie Minogue. Astrology is apparently as popular today as it was in ancient Babylon. What people do not want is a God Who says *Take up your cross and follow me*, but He is, in fact the only true God and it is only through following Him that we live.

February 23rd

II Chronicles 15 vv 1-19

This chapter summarises the message of most of the Old Testament. If you want things to go right, you walk with God. The world's problems are the result of its failure to obey God. The chosen people are not an elite, protected from the general condemnation. They have a special responsibility to remain faithful. They have the Law and the Prophets. They are specially blessed, but being specially blessed makes them specially responsible. They have to be thorough in extirpating evil from among themselves, even to the point of deposing an idolatrous queen. But what about v13 where they decide to put to death all those who will not seek the LORD? Moslems do it today. Christians did it in the past. We know that it is not the way of Jesus. We need to be thorough in dealing with evil, but not ruthless in dealing with evil people, but it is difficult to know where to draw lines. I'd like to see all criminals reformed rather than punished, but I know this is unrealistic, but how severe should we be in punishing criminals. Does the murderer deserve to die, the rapist to be castrated, the thief to have his hand cut off? If they deserve these punishments, can merciful people carry them out?

February 24th

II Chronicles 17 vv 7-9

Jehoshaphat is one of the Chronicler's heroes. As king, he tries to teach all the people the Law of the LORD. Religion has been a great force for literacy in western culture. Believing it to be important that people read and understand the Word of God, religious people have learnt to read themselves, taught their children and educated other people. The ability to read and write has then been a key to unlock the possibilities of acquiring and disseminating all kinds of knowledge. Our education system has its roots in the Christian endeavour to study and to pass on the Word of God. Now we have turned things the wrong way round again. Reading, writing and arithmetic and all sorts of other subjects dominate the school curriculum, while Religious Instruction barely clings on, not so much as the study of God's Word, but the study of what people believe. Faith is marginalised, yet we Christians know that faith is central to our human existence. Do we acquiesce in the marginalisation of religion in our society or do we make a stand and insist that God is not an optional extra but the very ground of our being?

February 25th

II Chronicles 18 vv 1-34

Jehoshaphat was a good king and he made peace with the northern kingdom, by this time under the rule of King Ahab. Now Ahab was successful in worldly terms, but he was a bad man, far too much under the influence of his wife Jezebel. Jehoshaphat gets mixed up in Ahab's military campaigning. He is suspicious that he is being compromised and inveigled into doing something foolish and wrong. (Given that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, it is wrong to act foolishly. *The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.*) False prophets give Ahab the advice he wants. They tell him that the LORD is on his side and that he will win. Jehoshaphat recognises that Ahab is being deceived by sycophants, but he still goes ahead with the alliance even when one true prophet explains what is really going on. As a result, he is nearly shot. Despite his attempts to deceive the opposition, Ahab still gets killed. God is in control.

February 26th

II Chronicles 19 vv 1-11

Jehoshaphat gets reprimanded by Jehu the son of the seer for forming alliances with the northern kingdom which does not practise religion in a manner up to the standards required and where powerful, successful kings have become tyrants and military adventurers.

He does, however strive to establish true religion in the areas he controls. Note verse 6. *And he said to the judges, Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the LORD who is with you in the judgment.*

I was brought up to believe that England was a Christian country and that it was self-evident that whatever job you did, you did it for the LORD. You would do your best for your employers, colleagues, shareholders and customers and act responsibly for the general good, not for selfish gain. You would expect to pray about your work, for guidance and strength. As S Paul says, *And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.* This would be true of any career, but especially for those doing jobs like teacher, nurse, doctor, policemen, judge, politician and especially priest – jobs we might most naturally think of as vocations.

In a secular, post-Christian society, however, teachers may be asked to teach values which are not Christian, doctors and nurses to carry out procedures troubling to a Christian conscience, policemen and judges to enforce unchristian legislation, politicians to compromise their faith if they wish for high office. How do we as a Church respond? Do we retreat into a ghetto – shielding our families and protecting our purity from the challenges of compulsory liberal secularisation – or do we mix in with the world we live in and risk compromising our faith to the extent that it ceases to be of value?

February 27th

II Chronicles 20 vv 1-19

Is it right to pray for victory? If you can't pray for God's blessing on what you are doing, you shouldn't be doing it! If we are compelled to fight in a good cause it is right to commit our cause to Him.

February 28th

II Chronicles 20 vv 20-30

What happens here is that the Ammonites and the Moabites have combined together to attack Jehoshaphat's Kingdom of Judah. Jehoshaphat leads his people in prayer and his enemies decide first to attack the Edomites. They lose and the people of Judah pick up the plunder left on the battlefield. The Chronicler is quite clear that God is in control of history and that He answers the prayer of the righteous.

For all sorts of reasons, modern people find this belief difficult. If God intervenes in history, why didn't He stop Hitler before 6,000,000 Jews died in the concentration camps? If God intervenes in history, doesn't that undermine the laws of science, which require the universe always to behave predictably? Does God favour some nations (like Israel and Britain or America) and not others (like Moab and Germany or Russia)? Surely the Christian Good News is that, while none of us is righteous, God loves everybody and forgives in preference to punishing?

Some modern Christians try to get out of these awkward questions by suggesting that God's power is limited or that He does not intervene in human affairs. The effect of this, however, is to suggest that prayer makes no difference and that it does not matter ultimately whether or not we act justly, except from a humanist point of view. So God becomes largely irrelevant to everyday life and Church is reduced to pleasant pastime for people who happen to enjoy community singing in mediaeval buildings.

If you believe in a God Who matters, I am afraid you just have to face up to the hard questions and accept that you may not find out the answers until the resurrection of the dead. But keep praying and keep the faith.

February 29th

II Chronicles 20 vv 31-37

The high places are the shrines all over Israel where people worshipped false gods or worshipped YHWH inadequately. Even the best kings found them impossible to get rid of. People want religion, but they don't want to accept the implications of wholehearted commitment to God. It was a mistake to try to work with wicked King Ahaziah.

March 1st

II Chronicles 21 vv 1-7

How do you deal with challenges to state security? Some people would argue that law and order and public safety are so important that you have to deal ruthlessly with all perceived challenges. Government restricts the rights of terrorist suspects because, although nothing may have been proved against them, they are a perceived risk to innocent life. We are also casually told that keeping armed police officers on high alert will inevitably mean the occasional shooting of an entirely innocent person (c.f. Stockwell). Certain criminals are given indeterminate sentences. They will not be let out of prison, even when they have paid their debt to society, if the authorities think they are at risk of re-offending. Jehoram has his brothers (rivals for the throne and therefore potential instigators of civil war) killed. The Bible condemns treating individuals unjustly for what is supposedly the common good. What was true then is as true now. You can't save society by taking away the rights of individuals because society is made up of individuals.

March 2nd

II Chronicles 21 vv 8-20

When the king is an evil man, the kingdom begins to fall apart. Subject people rebel. Foreign nations invade. The king himself becomes very sick. It is naïve to believe that there is a simple connection between sin and misfortune. There are times when the wicked flourish and the good are martyred. It is completely wrong to blame people for their own troubles. Even where they have brought trouble on themselves, they still need compassion rather than condemnation. It is, however, equally naïve to believe that there is not a connection between rebellion against God and things going wrong. It is just the way things are. God made the Universe and when we do not act in accordance with God's loving design for it, things go wrong – as they are going wrong in contemporary Britain.

March 3rd

II Chronicles 22 vv 1-12

All this is pretty confusing, not least because the main characters have more than one name and also they have similar names. The wicked Jehoram dies, leaving just one son, Ahaziah. His mother was Athaliah and she was a member of the northern kingdom's wicked royal house.

The marriage is part of Judah's ill-advised alliance with Israel. Jehu and Hazael are generals, respectively in Israel and Syria. They form an alliance and depose the kings of Israel and Syria, taking their place. Because Ahaziah of Judah is visiting Joram of Israel at the time, he too gets killed in the uprising. His mother Athaliah then seizes the throne of Judah, murdering her own grandsons, who might have been rivals. However, the king's daughter is married to Jehoida the priest and they manage to save one of the boys, Joash. Hazael's own account of the uprising has recently been found in northern Israel inscribed on a stone, confirming some of the details of the Bible story.

March 4th

II Chronicles 23 vv 1-21

The priests and Levites assist the young Joash in mounting a coup. They get him proclaimed King and Athaliah and her supporters are destroyed. The things to note are in v16 where a covenant is made – Judah will be the LORD's people – and v17 where the Temple of Baal is demolished. What all this has been about is whether Israel and Judah will worship Baal or YHWH. Religion is still a very powerful force in politics and a great deal of the violence in the world today is tied up with religious wars and rivalries. Some people conclude that the human race would be better off without religion. That it is to forget the horrors perpetrated by atheist communist regimes. It is not religion that causes wars. Human beings cause wars and they pervert both faith and political philosophies in a vain attempt to justify the violence characteristic of their fallen nature. If we want peace, we must not eradicate religion. What we must do is to seek the Truth of God - Jesus Christ – and to proclaim Him to the world. I admit that this still leaves open the question. When persuasion fails to make people good, what coercion is legitimate?

March 5th

II Chronicles 24 vv 1-14

Fund-raising! It isn't a new problem for the church. Buildings have to be maintained, ministers paid and, more importantly, there is support for charitable causes and the promotion of mission. Lots of ideas for fund-raising from pew rents and the sale of indulgences to fetes and raffles – but the best source of funds always is the freewill offerings of the faithful.

March 6th

II Chronicles 24 vv 15-22

Joash was obviously easily influenced. So long as the priest Jehoida lived, he was guided by his wise counsel. When Jehoida died, however, King Joash fell under the spell of the princes who wanted the freedom and irresponsibility they thought they could get from lowering standards. Chronicles makes clear that God did not give up on them easily. He sent messengers, prophets, to call them to repentance, to turn back to the pure religion of YHWH. But they would not listen. The greatest of these prophets was the son of the priest Jehoida – Zechariah. They stoned Zechariah and Zechariah becomes a sort of archetype of the person martyred for faithfulness to God. Jesus Himself, centuries later, refers to Zechariah in the context of His own Death and the deaths of all the Christian martyrs. (Incidentally those who think that the prophetic and the priestly were conflicting traditions in Ancient Israel should note how often the prophets come from priestly families.

March 7th

II Chronicles 24 vv 23-27

Jesus also said that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. Joash suffered the same fate that he inflicted on Zechariah. Violence begets violence. We have faced the fact that it is sometimes necessary for a nation to fight in a just cause or to use force against criminals and terrorists, but you have to be very careful of what you are starting when you take up arms.

March 8th

II Chronicles 25 1-4

Joash's servants thought they were doing right in killing him because he had become corrupt and a murderer. Joash's son then has them executed. Violence begets violence. Once you lose respect for law and the forces in society which instil respect – religion, family, tradition, moral philosophy, mutual trust between rulers and ruled – you are only left with violence and the threat of violence to enforce order. This is a very dangerous situation because violence is in itself destabilising. Clever politicians who despise religion, undermine the family, question every tradition, lack a coherent moral philosophy, treat subjects as suspects and themselves fail to honour their word or accept responsibility for their mistakes, are playing with fire.

March 9th

II Chronicles 25 vv 5-13

This is an ugly episode and I was tempted to miss it out of our readings. But this is sacred Scripture. So what do we learn from it? In yesterday's reading we saw how ruthless Amaziah could be. Now he wants to go to war with the Edomites and he hires mercenaries from northern Israel. This is wrong because the northern Israelites are not pure worshippers of YHWH. Amaziah dismisses them and defeats the Edomites without them. But then he kills 10,000 Edomite prisoners! This cannot be right. Meanwhile, while the Judan army is fighting the Edomites, the dismissed Israelite mercenaries turn on the inhabitants of Judah. It is all so terrible – as are many of the situations we hear about today through the news media – battles, massacres, burnings of villages, rapes, children killed or forced to join militias. Watching the news I often thinks of the words:

Give peace in our time, O Lord.

Because there is none other that fighteth for us but only thou O God.

We can't sort out the mess. We must pray that God will.

March 10th

II Chronicles 25 vv 14-16

Why did Amaziah decide to worship the gods of Edom, the gods who had been shown time and again to be useless? Why do people put career before family when everyone knows that no-one on his death bed ever said that he wished he had spent more time at the office? Why do families fall out over wills when everyone knows that sisters mean more than Mum's engagement ring? Why do people go to Tesco's on Sundays when they claim to revere the spiritual above the mundane? I blame that perversion in human nature which the Church calls original sin.

March 11th

II Chronicles 25 vv 17-28

Having beaten the Edomites, Amaziah thought he could take on the northern kingdom. Arrogance bred arrogance. Having turned away from God, he could no longer see the truth clearly. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Having rejected the LORD, Amaziah acted unwisely and brought ruin on his kingdom.

March 12th

II Chronicles 26 v 1

They are raising the school leaving age to 18. This may or may not be a good thing, but we should not forget that people are able to take responsibility long before that age. We are only too inclined to baby people. Children are allowed no independence because we fear for their safety. Whereas in the past, older children helped look after brothers and sisters and youth organisations encouraged leadership skills and responsibility among young people, anything less than wrapping them in cotton wool until they reach the age of 18 is now regarded as tantamount to child abuse. In terms of irresponsible behaviour such as binge drinking and casual sex, adolescence is prolonged into people's thirties. Even adults are protected by Nanny State from life style choices which might harm them. If we take away people's freedom to take responsibility for their own lives and for those around them, we impoverish them as people. God took the risk of entrusting us with freedom. Governments must do no less.

March 13th

II Chronicles 26 vv 1-15

Uzziah enjoyed a long and prosperous reign. He not only achieved military success, but also agricultural and technological improvement. The Chronicler is quite clear that this was because he feared the LORD.

March 14th

II Chronicles 26 vv 16-23

Uzziah, no doubt buoyed up by all his successes, got above himself. He was not content to be king; he wanted to be priest as well. Centuries before, before the Israelites conquered Jerusalem, men such as Melchizedek had been priests and kings in Jerusalem. But, in Israel/Judah, there was a separation of powers. Power corrupts. One person should not exercise all the power. Kings, not priests, rule. However, kings are not absolute rulers. They rule under God. Priests, prophets, counsellors have to be free to be able to point out when kings are wrong. Power must be dispersed or else it will certainly be abused. It took Mussolini to get the Italian trains running on time. Dictatorship appears efficient. Self-confident governments such as ours get impatient of having their plans delayed or opposed by back bench MPs, the House of Lords, the courts, the Church and religious groups, local councils, referenda and elections. So they whip the Commons, limit the

Lords' powers, challenge the courts, downgrade religious influence in public life, centralise decisions formerly taken locally, avoid referenda and put decisions that used to be decided by elected representatives in the hands of government appointed quangos and officials. Centralisation is efficient, but very dangerous as Mussolini's subsequent history demonstrates.

March 15th

II Chronicles 28 vv 1-4

Ahaz, the grandson of Uzziah, re-established the pagan cults in Judah, the southern kingdom and for that God allowed him to be defeated by his enemies. In C21 Britain, religion is generally treated as of little importance. It is a private matter for the individual, a matter of opinion and no-one else's business. We are rightly appalled by religious persecutions and heresy trials. We do not (many of us) believe in an interventionist jealous God Who punishes people because they worship the wrong gods. And yet look at what Ahaz was doing. It appears that the people in Ahaz' time were sacrificing children. Some forms of religion are abhorrent. They do come under God's Judgment. We are right to tell the practitioners that they are wrong and to use force if necessary to prevent e.g. human sacrifice or the burning of witches or the immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres. We tend to imagine that other religions are not dissimilar to ours, church fetes and cream teas, only with slightly different rituals and ministers. They are not. Religion is one of the most powerful forces in human history. Get it right and you have peace and justice. Get it wrong and you have religious wars, inquisitions and oppression.

March 16th

II Chronicles 28 vv 5-8

All the little kingdoms are terrified of the Assyrian empire which is spreading westward to swallow them all up. Syria and Israel (capital Samaria) try to force Judah to join them in fighting the Assyrians. It is this threat which provides the occasion when Isaiah tells Ahaz that a virgin (a young woman) shall conceive and bear a son and that this is a sign that Ahaz need not be afraid. Later, of course, this would be the sign of the Birth of Jesus Whose Birth would mean that the whole world need not be afraid. Ahaz, however, does not appear to have trusted in the LORD and the consequence is that he is overrun.

March 17th

II Chronicles 28 vv 9-15

Ironically, although Ahaz will not listen to the prophet of the LORD, the victorious northerners do listen to the prophet Oded who reminds them that they are all brothers and they release the Judan prisoners of war, supplying them with what they need to get home. Today is St Patrick's Day. The northern and southern Irish are brothers. We give thanks for the enormous progress of the peace process and pray for a continued improvement in the relations between Catholics and protestants. Think of other communities divided on religious, ethnic or political lines and pray for reconciliation. Civil wars, like family quarrels, are sometimes the most vicious and hardest to resolve.

March 18th

II Chronicles 28 vv 16-27

The alliance with Northern Israel had not saved Syria. Damascus had fallen to the Assyrians. In the general chaos, all sorts of minor wars had broken out and Judah was coming off badly. Ahaz appealed for help to the big bully who had terrified everybody else – Assyria. This meant that he had to worship the Assyrian gods and made an altar based on the design of the altar in Damascus. Victorious armies forced the people they conquered to worship the victors' gods. So this was both a humiliation and an act of apostasy – infidelity to IHWH. Theologically and politically, this strategy was doomed to disaster.

March 19th

II Chronicles 29 vv 1-11

Hezekiah inherits a kingdom in a desperate strait. Military defeats have led to the ravaging of the countryside, the towns and villages. Some Judans are prisoners of war or sold as slaves. The Temple has been stripped of its treasures and defiled by heathen shrines. Hezekiah wants a new beginning and he begins with religious reform. The problems of Judah are the result of their apostasy. Rejecting God and His Law, they have practised dishonesty and violence and shown no compassion. That is why their society has fallen apart. The first step to restoration is religious reform, to repent, to turn away from sin, to return to the LORD. We would probably have started by trying to sort out the physical mess and the political problems, leaving religion till later as something less important. But we would have failed, because faith is the only sure foundation and without it, nothing else stands up.

March 20th

II Chronicles 30 vv 1-12

Hezekiah, King of Judah, not only restored the worship of the LORD at Jerusalem, he invited all those northerners who had been cut off from the Jerusalem cult for a very long time. Many of them laughed at the messengers, but some came, and those who came had a wonderful time.

Over the last couple of years, the Church in England has been putting on a *Back to Church Sunday* in September. The idea is that, on one particular Sunday, we invite people who have stopped coming to church for one reason or another to come back. Some laugh. Some get angry. Some do come on that Sunday and some stay.

It probably is worth trying. The other part of Hezekiah's reform, however, was to purify the home team, the worship in Judah. I should not want to invite people back into the maelstrom of parish politics which led to their leaving in the first place!

March 21st

II Chronicles 30 vv 13-37

It was obviously a wonderful time. I think the best bit is where they come to the end of the seven day feast and decide to carry on feasting for another seven days. They are enjoying their worship so much that they don't want it to stop! What can we learn from that?

March 22nd

II Chronicles 31 v1

If we are sincere in our worship, when we leave the temple or the church and go home, we live in accordance with what we have sung and said in our services. The joy we experience in worship will accompany us out into the world. God is with us everywhere. We do indeed receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, but He is still in us and we are still in Him when we are at home or work or wherever we are. It follows that the way we act at work or wherever, what we say, the people we are, is determined by the experience of worship. There is something wrong with our worship if in the world outside church we live for the same things (have the same idols) as people who do not share our faith.

March 23rd

II Chronicles 31 vv 2-12

They say that the last part of any person to be converted is the pocket. These people had, however, been thoroughly converted. The king not only reassigned the duties of the various ministers, he also provided the wherewithal for the daily sacrifices. The people also brought in their tithes, to the point that there was much more than was needed to maintain the ministers and storehouses had to be built for the surplus.

When you ask people what they don't like about the church, one very common answer is that the church is always after your money. Doing things the wrong way round, we devote a lot of our time and energy to worrying about money and buildings. Unlike Hezekiah, church committees are only too likely to say that they can only start thinking about worship, mission, pastoral care etc., when we have got the books balanced. Church committees can be quite cynical if someone suggests committing our need for money to the Lord in prayer.

The result is that, when we face the public, we do so with a begging bowl in our hand, the very thing that puts people off about the church. We get new members, but, the last thing to be converted being the pocket, they may not put much in the plate. If we challenge them about their giving, we may find we put them off altogether. So we fail in our mission and we still cannot balance the books.

My belief is that we should start with religious reform as Hezekiah did, that people should have such an experience of God when they take part in our public worship that it is as natural to put large sums in the plate as it is to buy your fiancée and expensive engagement ring. That, however, would mean focussing our services on God, not our own personal likes and dislikes.

March 24th

II Chronicles 32 vv 1-8

Yesterday, I wrote about church committees being cynical about those who say that prayer is the answer to our financial problems. There is a risk of polarising: those who favour practical solutions and those who pray. In fact, as Hezekiah here demonstrates, we need both – to take practical measures and to commit our cause to the LORD in prayer.

March 25th

II Chronicles 32 vv 9-19

The Assyrian king besieges another Judan town, Lachish, while he sends messengers to undermine the morale of the people of Jerusalem. The archaeological record shows great suffering in Lachish. Sennacherib's point is that none of the gods of any other nation have saved them from the Assyrians; why should YHWH be able to save Judah? Even if He could save them, why should He? Hasn't Hezekiah destroyed a lot of YHWH's shrines in carrying out his religious reforms? The Chronicler's answer is that YHWH can save where the pagan gods could not, because the pagan gods don't exist, whereas YHWH is the Creator of everything that does exist. Hezekiah's reforms were necessary because even the YHWH worship practised outside Jerusalem was worldly and therefore corrupt. This is really the issue. Do we really believe that the LORD will look after us and that only He can look after us? Do we believe Jesus, when He says *Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you?* Or do we really think that we first have to make sure about things like money and housing and a good career and then, if we feel like it, we'll add the spiritual as the icing on the cake of our lives?

March 26th

II Chronicles 32 vv 20-23

Hezekiah wisely took all those precautions to fortify the city. He also prayed to God. As it happened, they did not have to fight at all this time. It seems that the Assyrian army caught some plague, which is not unusual when large armies have to eat and make sanitary arrangements in the field. The Chronicler, however, sees the Hand of God in this deliverance.

March 27th

II Chronicles 32 vv 24-33

Chronicles summarises what is quite a long story in II Kings 20 and in Isaiah. Hezekiah falls ill and prays. Isaiah promises that he will be cured and offers him a sign. This is when the shadow goes back ten degrees. Hezekiah recovers and is granted another 15 years of life. It is not prayer alone. There is also the practical remedy of applying a poultice to the boil! Hezekiah carries out some useful engineering projects, including digging a tunnel (which is still there) to bring water to Jerusalem in a siege. When he receives ambassadors from Babylon,

however, he cannot resist showing them, his treasures. Isaiah warns him that the Babylonians will be back with a mighty army to take those treasures for themselves.

March 28th

II Chronicles 33 vv 1-20

Manasseh is the worst of the kings of Judah. We've read about his crimes today – his perversion of religion which leads to moral and ethical breakdown. II Kings can't find a good word to say about him. But here in Chronicles we read that, at the lowest point of his life, Manasseh repented and God gave him a new start.

*The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.*

It is hard to believe that some people who have been really wicked can ever be forgiven or that we ordinary people need to be forgiven at all, but, if you believe the Bible, none of us is good enough because the standard is Jesus, but because of Jesus no-one, no matter how bad, is rejected if he turns to Christ.

March 29th

II Chronicles 34 vv 14-28

In these last chapters of Chronicles (and Kings) history rather repeats itself. A couple of bad kings are followed by a good king. During the reign of the bad kings, the kingdom falls apart, but the good kings lead the nation to turn back to God and God blesses them with peace and prosperity. In many ways Josiah's reforms parallel Hezekiah's, but a significant difference is that, whilst repairing the Temple in Josiah's reign, they find the Book of the Law. A lot of people think that the book they found was our Book of Deuteronomy. The basic message of Deuteronomy (as of the Old Testament in general) is that if you walk with God, things go well and if you don't, you're looking at disaster. This is a simple message, illustrated time and again in the OT, with stories about individuals and kingdoms. These are the stories we should all know and teach to our children, because this principle that the world only works properly when its inhabitants live by the precepts of its Creator is the foundation of all human behaviour and the only salvation for the human race in this world or the next.

March 30th

II Chronicles 35 vv 20-27 & 36 vv 1-21

Times were a changing. It is likely that the Assyrian Empire was in decline and the Egyptians were trying to bolster it as a buffer against the Babylonians, who were getting more powerful. Josiah got mixed up in the fighting, probably seeking some advantage for himself and Judah, and got killed. So ended the reign of the last good king, lamented by the prophet Jeremiah, who would now see three weak and foolish kings lead the nation to ultimate defeat at the hands of the Babylonians.

Jehoikim started out as Egypt's vassal and then found himself within the Babylonian sphere of influence. He vacillated in his allegiances. More importantly, from a biblical point of view, he did not remain faithful to YHWH and the result was that the Babylonians besieged the city and captured it soon after the king's death. The new king, Jehoiachin, was still a boy and he was carried off with some others to be a captive in Babylon. The Babylonians made Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah in his place. Zedekiah was a weak man. Sometimes he listened to the prophet Jeremiah. He was more often under the control of the Judan nobles and princes. Allowing himself to be led by them, he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, provoking the second siege, which ended in the destruction of the Temple and much of the city and the exile of a much larger proportion of the population.

By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept.

Those who went into exile with Jehoiachin were always thought to be the better group than those who were left behind. Jehoiachin is quite well treated in Babylon, but Zedekiah comes to a horrible end.

The lesson the Bible draws is that Judah ceased to exist as an independent state because it was disloyal to YHWH. The question we need to answer is can our society survive without God?

March 31st

II Chronicles 36 vv 21-23

Chronicles takes the story a bit further on than Kings. God has not given up on His people despite their apostasy. In time the Babylonian Empire is superseded by the Median Empire and the Medes are superseded by the Persians and the Persian Emperor, Cyrus, encourages

the exiles to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild. The bible recognises that this is all part of God's plan for Israel (and indeed for the human race as the Saviour of us all will be born a Jew) and it has all been foretold by the prophets. A remnant is saved from the destruction that humanity's rejection of God's Law of Love has wrought. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the Bible starts with the whole human race, as personified by Adam. Then the focus is progressively sharpened: Noah, then Shem of Noah's children, then Abraham of Shem's descendants, Isaac of Abraham's, Jacob of Isaac's twins, Judah out of the twelve tribes, right down to the only truly faithful "remnant" Jesus Who, after all, personifies the whole human race and tells His friends to share the Good News with all people of all nations.

Note the bit about observing the Sabbaths. The Jews had been ignoring the Sabbaths. The Sabbath rest was an opportunity to meet God in worship, an opportunity to spend time with family, a rest from business and a reminder of what is truly important, a recollection that trade is fair exchange not an opportunity to get rich by cheating others, the Sabbath year is a rest for the earth from human exploitation. The exile is seen as necessary, an enforced Sabbath to make up for all the Sabbaths the Jews had missed. We tend to see Sunday observance as a quaint custom for old-fashioned fuddy-duddy Christians. No time for worship, no time for family, perpetual busyness, using up the world's resources as if there were no tomorrow.

Maybe we need to find time for God, for one another and for the natural world if we want to save our civilisation.

