

St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

Bible Notes

Dated

October – December

2023

October 1st (Trinity 17)

I Corinthians 1 v1

Paul, called to be an apostle,

The call of Paul was very wonderful. Determined to destroy the nascent Church, he set off to Damascus with letters from the high priest authorising him to bind any believers in Damascus and to bring them to Jerusalem where they would be imprisoned. On the Road to Damascus, the Risen Christ appeared to Paul and stopped him in his tracks. Paul then was unable to see and had to be led by the hand to Damascus, where a disciple named Ananias cured him of his blindness and baptised him, so that full of the Holy Ghost, Paul began to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The word *vocation* means *calling*, though it is often used these days as a fancy word for job – as in, for example, *vocational training*. All Christians do, however, have a vocation. God called each one of us and we all have our part to play in bringing in His Kingdom. We should pray each for God's grace in order that we may determine what He wants us to do today and every day.

LORD, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

October 2nd

I Corinthians 1 v1

And Sosthenes our brother.

Everybody's heard of Paul the apostle, even non-Christians, but how many people have heard of Sosthenes. I can't say that I know very much about him. The name Sosthenes only appears in one other place in the Bible – Acts 18¹⁷ where a Sosthenes is the chief ruler of the synagogue – not a Christian – who gets beaten by the Greeks in a riot at Corinth. It is possible that it is the same man, that the ruler of the synagogue was subsequently converted and travelled with Paul. Sosthenes' predecessor as ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, was converted by Paul's preaching. On the other hand, there might have been two different Sosthenes. We just don't know.

Well, I'm not famous. Probably most of my readers are not famous. Only our immediate family and friends may know us and remember us, but we all, each one of us, has his place in God's plan & we are all equally valuable.

October 3rd

I Corinthians 1 v2

The Church of God which is at Corinth.

Paul spent a lot of time at Corinth – eighteen months. He first preached in the synagogue and, when the Gospel was rejected by many of the Jews, preached the Gospel to the Gentiles. He had been staying with a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who, like him were tentmakers. They may already have been believers. They certainly were later on and played a big part in the ministry. After leaving the synagogue, Paul went to the house of Justus next door to the synagogue and I have always thought probably held meetings for worship there, though it doesn't say so explicitly.

There is no church building at Corinth. In fact, there are no church buildings mentioned anywhere in the Bible. There was the Temple at Jerusalem, but its sacrifices were no longer required after Christ's Crucifixion and it was destroyed by the Romans forty years later. There were the Jewish synagogues, but, strictly speaking, a synagogue is a gathering together of believers rather than a building. You might sometimes think, by the way we go on, that Jesus came to found a historic building preservation society. But there were no church buildings in Corinth or anywhere else in those days. The Church was and is the people.

October 4th

I Corinthians 1 v2

To them which that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.

So who are the people who make up the Church? All Christian people, all over the world, on earth and in heaven. *We are the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit*. We are sanctified, made holy, because all our sins are forgiven in Christ. Washed clean in Christ, we are made holy like Him. All Christians are saints, not just the ones we honour by writing *Saint* before their names. It is Christ Who makes us His own and sets us free from sin to do good works, the good works which He has prepared for each one of us to do.

There is the universal Church consisting of all Christian people on earth and in heaven and lots of local churches like Corinth and Cuxton and Halling.

October 5th

I Corinthians 1 v3

Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I find my fellow Christians difficult. From the point of view of people like rectors and churchwardens, it sometimes seems that some people are never satisfied, always complaining, no matter how hard we try. Church meetings can be a nightmare. There are foolish, sometimes bitter disagreements within churches. Personally, I'm not always good about forgetting what I ought to have forgiven. Then there are the frustrations one sometimes feels when dealing with one's superiors in the Church who don't always seem to be on the same wavelength as us in the local Church. I confess that I can be arrogant – too sure that I know best. Paul too had many frustrations when dealing with his fellow Christians. They divided into factions. They behaved like fools. They followed false teachings. They cast aside the basic rules of decency, morality and common sense. They fell far short of what we are called to be as the adopted children of God. Yet Paul loves his fellow Christians for all that. He prays for them. He blesses them. He sets us an example of loving one another always – no matter how we get on one another's nerves.

Sometimes, I walk down the church path seething about something. I try then to remember St Paul's words: **THE** *grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. Amen.*

October 6th

I Corinthians 1 v4

I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ.

Every member of our local Church, every member of the Church universal, has been given the grace of Jesus Christ. By the grace of God we are what we are – very different people with very different virtues and very different failings. Christ died for everyone of us – the difficult people as well as the easily recognised saints. It follows therefore that we ought to appreciate one another, to give thanks to God for one another.

October 7th

I Corinthians 1 v5

That in everything ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge.

We don't sufficiently appreciate one another and we don't sufficiently appreciate ourselves, what it means to be the children of God. Christ died for you as He died for me. He gives to each of us His Holy Spirit. Our Father is no less than the Creator of everything that is, the Sustainer of the created order, the One Who is working His purposes out for the redemption of His whole creation. The Bible is His Word to us. We receive Him into our hearts in Holy Communion. In prayer, we converse with the thrice Holy. His commandments are our guide for this life. His promise is life eternal in Christ. I cannot understand how we can be less than wholehearted in our love for God, but I know only too well how easy it is to be so.

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;
Oh, light the flame within my heart,
And I will love Thee more and more,
Until I see Thee as Thou art.

October 8th (Trinity 18)

I Corinthians 1 v6

Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you.

So what confirms the testimony of Christ in us? How do we know Jesus and that everything in yesterday's notes is true? We have our own personal experience of Him. We know how He has looked after us in our lives. We talk with Him in prayer. We know Him in the Sacraments. Some people are vouchsafed particular experiences of God. There are times when our feelings about God are not like that. We are indifferent or even resentful. He seems to be absent. But we still have the fellowship of the Church. He hasn't gone away and He loves us as are. And there is the testimony of the Bible which we read every day.

LORD, we beseech thee, grant thy people grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with pure hearts and minds to follow thee the only God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

October 9th

I Corinthians 1 v7

So that ye come behind in no good gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If you are like me, you have a lot in the past to be thankful for, happy memories of people and places, of the things you have done in your life. You may remember a time when you thought that in the future anything would be possible. And, it may be, that, as you get older, you can't do as much as you used to, you are no longer so optimistic about what you might yet achieve and you are conscious of how much is behind you, never to be recovered.

It is right to be thankful for the past and to learn from the past. We don't, however, have to regret that the good things of the past are passed and will not return. The past is a preparation for the present and the future. What awaits us as Christian people is infinitely more glorious than that which is behind.

October 10th

I Corinthians 1 v8

Who shall also confirm you in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He will not let us go. I'm not saying that it impossible for us to walk away from Jesus. He respects our freedom to make choices – even foolish and wicked choices. He desires our love and love must be freely given. *I know whom I have believed* is one of those clauses in the Bible which we ought to know by heart. It ought always to be there in the backs of our minds. *I know whom I have believed*. Whatever happens to us, whatever we do – no matter how foolish, no matter how wicked even – Jesus is always there. He never gives up on us.

October 11th

I Corinthians 1 v9

God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ.

I've been reading articles theorising about why people let their church membership lapse. Some may no longer understand why faith is rational. Some may feel that God has let them down. Some are disaffected with the Church. But most people who have left the Church have just drifted away. I don't know why we may drift away, but I do know that it would be impossible for us to do so if we really understood what we are drifting away from.

October 12th

I Corinthians 1 v10

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Christ prayed that we should be one. He commanded us to love one another as He loves us. We are the Body of Christ – one Body, one Spirit, one faith, one Lord. So how come there is so much division in the Church? We're divided into denominations: the Western Church & Eastern Orthodoxy; Catholic & Protestant; Anglicans, Methodists, URC, Baptists, Pentecostals. The list goes on and on. And then there are divisions within denominations. Within the C of E, we have high church & low church, Anglo-catholics, evangelicals and liberals, traditionalists and modernisers. Within congregations too, there are divisions as people disagree about all sorts of things. There is nothing wrong with disagreement. There are limits to what it is possible to believe and still to count as a Christian. Transcending those limits makes you a heretic. There are plenty of areas of disagreement which don't amount to heresy. But, whatever the disagreement, even if you think your opponent has gone so far to become heretical, sin only enters when there is no more love. Our calling is to love one another – no matter how much we might disagree over even important matters. St Paul says, *If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men*. The Litany prays: From all sedition, privy conspiracy, and rebellion; from all false doctrine, heresy, and schism; from hardness of heart, and contempt of thy Word and Commandment, *Good Lord, deliver us*. Schism is division. God's Word & Commandment amount to pure love – for God & for one another.

October 13th

I Corinthians 1 vv 11&12

People become attached to particular pastors and preachers. We benefit by their faithful ministry. The coming of a new minister can be difficult for a church if his predecessor was much loved and respected. There are famous preachers and church leaders who are given celebrity status, even in today's secular world. It is right to respect those who are our ministers, but it is unhealthy to idolise them. Idolatry is a sin. Only one human being is the very image of God and it is to Him alone that we owe unqualified allegiance and His prayer is that we should be one. We all have access to the Father in Him, to God Who is one, to God Who is love.

October 14th

I Corinthians 1 vv 12-17

When Pope John Paul II visited England, he performed a number of Baptisms. He wanted people to know that, for all the trappings of the papacy, he was simply a minister of religion, called by God (like millions of others) to be a pastor to God's people, to proclaim the Gospel and to teach the faith, and to administer the sacraments. All Christians are members of the priesthood of believers, equal before God, having access to the Father through Jesus our Lord by the grace of the Holy Spirit. All Christians have their vocations to serve God. For many of us, our vocation is to ministers of religion. We need to pray for more such vocations if we are to offer the services of the Church in every community.

The danger in the Pope's sincere demonstration of humility was that some people might imagine that being baptized by the Pope was somehow better or more prestigious than being baptized by an "ordinary" minister. That is, of course, not true. It is God Who bestows grace in Baptism, not the minister. It is God Who washes away our sins, adopts us His children and endows us with the Holy Spirit. It doesn't matter who administers the Sacrament – so long as he is recognised by the Church as having a vocation to do so. What matters is that God makes us His own and that we respond in faith.

Paul is concerned that people might think that those baptised by Paul were baptised into Paul's Church. Others perhaps thought that the authentic Church was based on the teaching of Apollos (one of Paul's team) or on Cephas (Peter), the apostle on whose faith Christ builds the Church. Some apparently thought that they were the only true Christians – perhaps relying on their own personal experience of God, to the exclusion of what everybody else thought. Paul is very clear that this kind of thinking is wrong. There is one Church. It is Christ's Church. Paul & Apollos and Peter and you & I each have our distinctive parts to play within Christ's Church, not to divide it, but to facilitate its growing together in love.

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.

October 15th Trinity19))

I Corinthians 1 v18

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

Interestingly, one of those articles about why people drift away from the Church gave the example of a child who couldn't understand the significance of the Cross and so rejected the doctrine altogether as she got older. Basically, she didn't understand the seriousness of sin or, if sin was serious, how Jesus dying on the Cross could make any difference. It is hard to grasp and there are many explanations as to what God means by sin and how the Death of Jesus overcomes sin's power.

We tend to judge our lives by the world's standards. We don't see ourselves as any worse than other people. In fact, I expect most readers of these notes are better people than the average. So we don't really regard ourselves as sinners. If we were, however, to judge ourselves by God's standards – perfect love – we should see that we most certainly are sinners. We know very well that sin reigns in this world and the suffering it causes and we are part of that unless we turn to Christ & repent of our sins. There is no middle way. We are either on God's side or we are against Him. We are building His Kingdom or we are undermining it. If we are not on God's side, we are doomed, because God is the source of all goodness. He is the Giver of life. As unrepentant sinners, we are cut off from perfect Love, from the Source of all life. We cannot rest unless we rest in Him and we cannot rest in God if we sin, if our lives are not exclusively motivated by love. So we are in fact all sinners. Sin is serious and we need redemption.

And this is where the Cross comes in. Left to our own devices, we are without hope. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own boot straps. But God is perfect love. He alone can fulfil the Law's demands and this He does by offering Himself for us on the Cross. He does everything necessary in order to make us at one with our heavenly Father.

O GOD, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee; Mercifully grant, that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 16th

I Corinthians 1 vv 19-21

A lot of people think that they are clever. They are self-sufficient. They don't need anyone else to tell them how to live. They certainly don't need God. They can manage their only lives perfectly well, thank you, and they and people like them have all the answers. Let them run the world and they'll sort out all our problems: ending wars, ensuring universal prosperity, defeating disease, overcoming such challenges as climate change. Such arrogance is a common human characteristic. We're not all as arrogant as the elite but I think that most of us are inclined to think that we can manage our own affairs. What makes sense is common sense, we think, but even Lucifer was brought down by pride. Looking at the world around us, we humans haven't done a great job. We really ought not to be too confident of our own ability to work out what's what and to put the world to rights.

Actually, the wisdom of God turns out not to be self-sufficiency, but self-sacrifice and this Jesus demonstrates on the Cross, thereby overcoming all the power of sin, the world and Lucifer.

October 17th

I Corinthians I vv 22&23

Several times in the Gospels, people ask Jesus for a sign to prove that He is Who He says He is – some sort of miracle they require. Jesus performs plenty of miracles. If you have eyes to see, the miracles are signs of Who Jesus is, just as, if you have ears to hear, His parables are the Word of God. But human hearts are hard and they cannot see the significance of the miracles nor discern the truth of Christ's teaching. The only truly significant sign, He says, is His Crucifixion, Burial & Resurrection. But, even so, only a minority comprehend.

I've been in many discussions and arguments, trying to persuade people by philosophical and scientific logic that the Gospel makes logical sense and that they ought to believe it, but to little avail. It's not a total waste of time. Paul tried it at Athens (Acts 17), but he made very few converts.

The authentic Gospel is Christ crucified. Him we preach, whether they will hear or whether they will forebear.

October 18th (St Luke)

I Corinthians 1 v24

But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Doctors are powerful people. They are generally respected in the community. They have a vast amount of knowledge and skills which most other people do not have. We hope that they are also wise people knowing how to use their skills and knowledge for good purposes – to prevent disease where possible, to heal the sick if they can, and to ease our final journey when the time comes.

As we ponder what power and wisdom are, what does it mean that Christ actually is *the power of God and the wisdom of God*?

ALMIGHTY God, who calledst Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist, and Physician of the soul; May it please thee, that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

October 19th

I Corinthians 1 v25

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. And yet people think that they can manage without God. They believe that we should live in a secular society in which religion takes a back seat. People are welcome to follow any religion they like in the privacy of their own homes and hearts, but religion, many believe, should have no influence in the way we are governed or in the management of national and international affairs.

But what fools we are if we attempt to exclude God from the way we lead our lives, govern the country and run the world. *Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

October 20th

I Corinthians 1 vv 26-28

If you read the New Testament carefully, it is clear that from the start some wealthy and important people became Christians, but, by and large, it was mostly the poor and vulnerable who were open to the truth of the Gospel. They had no power, wealth, position or education to put their trust in. Despised tax collectors, women of the street, notorious sinners, slaves, lepers, the untreated sick, the indigent, flocked to Jesus and, after the Ascension, attended to the apostles' preaching. Religious leaders, the well-educated, the comfortably off, the people looked up to in their communities failed to recognise their need for Christ. Not only did they fail to recognise *the one thing needful*, they were unaware that they lacked anything. They were too full of themselves.

Two points. The first is that perhaps one of the reasons for the decline in religion in the more prosperous parts of the world is that people's lives are so filled up with what this world has to offer that they no longer even notice that they are missing *the one thing needful*. A bigger house, a better job, a wonderful holiday, new clothes or whatever will make them feel good about themselves, which might well be true, but the effects won't last. In order to know inner peace, we need to know God. My second point is even more worrying. By and large, in this country, the poor don't turn to the Church for spiritual nourishment. They might benefit by charities such as food banks, but they seldom join our services. Is that because they feel unwelcome?

October 21st

I Corinthians 1 v29

That no flesh should glory in his presence.

It is all of God. It is by His grace that we are what we are – Christian people, His children, His Body, His Temple. We have nothing which is not God's gift to us. We are not His because we are good, clever, good-looking, intelligent, wise, respectable, highly thought of, skilled, comfortably off or whatever. It is all of God. The only appropriate response to Him is humble gratitude.

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 through his blood.

October 22nd (Trinity 20)

I Corinthians 1 v30

But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.

This hard to grasp, but very wonderful. It's beyond my understanding, but, for all that, it astounds me. As Christians, we are in Christ and He dwells in us. As His Spirit unites with our spirit, so we grow into our true nature as human beings which is to be like Him in Whose image we are created. The virtues of Jesus – including, wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemptive power – become our virtues because we are becoming, through His grace, more like Him. We are blessed by Christ's virtues and are thereby set free and enabled to share His blessings with other people.

O ALMIGHTY and most merciful God, of thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech thee, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that though wouldest have done; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

October 23rd

I Corinthians 1 v31

That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

Over the years, you might have picked up various awards for the things you've achieved. When we were children, we were congratulated and maybe received certificates when we could swim a width, then a length of the pool. You get medals for winning races – or just for taking part in the case of marathons. You might have certificates for exams passed at school or a degree certificate. Perhaps, you captained the team that won the cup. It's good to feel that we have achieved something. It's nice to think that our efforts have been recognised. It feels good to receive some token of appreciation.

But ultimately, the glory is the Lord's. Whatever we might achieve, we have achieved by means of the talents and opportunities He has given us. We shouldn't be too full of ourselves. We shouldn't think less of other people who haven't succeeded in the things in which we have done well. Neither should we be too

cast down because we are less successful than other people. The point is to do our best with the opportunities which God has given us and to be thankful.

October 24th

I Corinthians 2 vv 1&2

Some people are powerful orators. Their words command attention. They enthuse multitudes – sometimes for good purposes, sometimes for evil purposes. Hitler was a great orator and he stirred crowds of thousands to great evil. Churchill was a great orator and his speeches helped to sustain a nation in its conflict against the spread and domination of that same great evil.

Others are great debaters, putting their case clearly and logically, They may be teachers or politicians. The orator speaks to the heart and the debater to the head. Some of the most inspiring speakers can do both. They inspire our emotions at the same time as appealing to our reason.

Paul could do both. He could debate. He could inspire. But it wasn't Paul he was preaching, Paul the theologian, Paul the enthusiast. Paul's task was to preach Christ crucified. However Paul might go about it – altering his words and methods to suit the circumstances of his hearers – what he had to do was to proclaim the simple truth of Christ on the Cross – to the Jews a stumbling-block, to the Greeks foolishness, but to them which are called, the power and wisdom of God.

October 25th

I Corinthians 2 vv 3&4

Why was Paul in fear and trembling when he preached to the people of Corinth. I can think of three possible reasons.

1. Most of us are at least initially nervous of public speaking. Paul had had plenty of experience by this time, but this was a new audience and he had met violent opposition in some of the other places he had preached.
2. There was considerable opposition in Corinth.
3. He might well have felt inadequate for the task. The preacher is called to declare the full counsels of God. Their eternal destiny might well depend on how his hearers respond. *Who is sufficient for these things?*

We should pray for our preachers and teachers. When we hear a lesson or a sermon, our hearts and minds ought to be open to receive the Word of God.

October 26th

I Corinthians 2 vv 3-5

Years ago I was in an argument with a friend about a particular ethical issue regarding animal experimentation in medicine. Logically, I defeated all his arguments one by one. So I'd convinced him, had I? "No," he said, "all you've done is to show that you are better at arguing than me." Paul's job wasn't to demonstrate how clever he was or how persuasive. His task wasn't to out argue his hearers, even his opponents. There is no real point in confounding other people's reservations or objections regarding faith in Christ Jesus. The task of the preacher is to be an instrument of the Spirit of God. It is God's Spirit Who speaks to the human spirit in power so that our human spirit may acknowledge Jesus as Lord and know that God is our Father. It's not because we've been convinced by a clever speaker that we are Christians; it is because God has made Himself known to us in Jesus Christ. Human beings may well have been God's instruments in demonstrating His love to us – parents, friends, other family, teachers, preachers, a church congregation – but it is only through the Holy Spirit that we are enabled to know God.

October 27th

I Corinthians 2 vv 6-8

The word *theology* has something of a bad press. People often think of theology as missing the point of faith – endless debates about things that don't really matter. But, just as geology is the study of the earth, theology is the study of God. Theology has been called *faith seeking understanding*. There certainly is a place for thinking about what our faith means and what it implies for the way we live our lives. It may be inappropriate to talk about deep mysteries when initially sharing the love of Christ with people who have not yet experienced it, but, once we know Him, the more we know of Him the better.

To those who have eyes to see, the wisdom of God (Jesus Christ our Lord) is manifest in the whole of Creation. Jesus is to be found in the Old Testament as well as the New. God's eternal plan permeates the whole of creation. We may pray to Him and contemplate Him and, the more we know of Him, the more we know there is to know.

October 28th (S Simon & S Jude)

I Corinthians 2 v9

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for those who love him.

I'm fond of quoting this verse in sermons and public prayer – the thought of heaven, what good things God has prepared for those who love Him. Of course, we have eternal life already here on earth. Eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent, but, blessed as we are here on earth, we shall be infinitely more blessed, when, through the grace of God, we attain to the Kingdom of Heaven.

ALMIGHTY God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone; Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made an holy temple acceptable unto thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

October 29th (Trinity 21)

I Corinthians 2 vv 10&11

Who really knows you? Some married couples get to know one another that each knows what the other one is going to say. But they can still surprise one another in good ways and in bad. You may think you know your children or your parents, but they too can surprise you. Do we really even know ourselves? *Know thyself* was a philosophical maxim which was inscribed upon the Temple of Apollo in the ancient Greek precinct of Delphi. If everybody knew himself, why would the oracle tell us to do so? Thales said, "The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself." Socrates said, "To know thyself is the beginning of wisdom." We know that Socrates was wrong about that. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Thales might have a point, but surely we know ourselves better than anyone else knows us? Well God knows us even better than we know ourselves. Only God really knows all about us. Thankfully, He is merciful. He knows us and He loves us. We know who and what we are (partially). Certainly only God knows God, but He makes Himself known to us because His Spirit dwells in us and we dwell in Him.

GRANT, we beseech thee, merciful Lord, to thy faithful people pardon and peace, that they may be cleansed from all their sins, and serve thee with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

October 30th

I Corinthians 2 v12

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

Are you struggling with this? If so, so am I. Paul is making a distinction between the Church (all those of us who know Jesus) and the world (those who don't know Jesus). The world has its own ways of looking at things. Some of them are sinful – like pride, lust and greed. Many are useful – such as science, philosophy, our physical strength, good health, the skills we may possess, politics, economics, military power – but none of them is sufficient. We, all human beings, were made for God and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Him. We shall never be satisfied until we know Him. If we do know Him, we renounce what is sinful in the world and we see those things which are useful in the world in their proper perspective. We look at science, philosophy, our physical strength, good health, the skills we may possess, politics, economics, military power, etc. in the light of eternity. They are not our reason for living. They are not our best life. But they have their place in enabling us to live our lives in furtherance of our true goal which is love God and keep His commandments.

October 31st

I Corinthians 2 vv 13-15

What is the meaning of Hallowe'en? Many cultures in the northern hemisphere have a festival at about this time to mark the shortening of the days and the coming of the cold. It is a time to think of death and the departed. Witches and ghosts often feature in celebrations of Hallowe'en. *Trick or treat* has become very common. Is *trick or treat* a bit of fun for children and adults alike or is it demanding money with menaces? It can be either, depending on who is doing the trick or treating and how the householder feels about it. The same could be said for the whole Hallowe'en thing. Some people regard it as demonic and to be discouraged. Most people think of Hallowe'en as harmless fun. It is a big source of revenue for shops and

purveyors of pumpkins and fancy dress. There are also people who take Hallowe'en seriously and value it both as a tradition and as an expression of how we feel about nature and our own place in the great cycle of life. So, how would we judge the value or otherwise of Hallowe'en? By the Spirit of God, of course, Who is love.

November 1st (All Saints)

I Corinthians 2 v16

For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? but we have the mind of Christ. But we have the mind of Christ. That's mind-boggling. I can remember when my mind was first boggled by this verse and trying to preach on it at All Saints Orpington where I was curate. No matter how often we read the Bible, how well we think we know it, there are always new treasures to surprise us. *We have the mind of Christ.* Our relationship – yours and mine – with Him is that intimate. He is so close to us and we to Him, like a married couple only more so. As our relationship develops, so we come to think and speak and act like Him. There are many pressures and temptations which drag us back towards the world's way of looking at things, but, if we walk with Christ in our daily lives, the spiritual prevails.

O ALMIGHTY God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord; Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

November 2nd

I Corinthians 3 vv 1&2

We're all at different stages on our Christian journey. Some people are very knowledgeable about the faith or very spiritual – not necessarily the same thing. Many people have little or no knowledge of Jesus. Well, He says you don't need a lot of faith: *If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.* It is God Who moves the mountains, not our faith. In the Gospels, even the apostles themselves appear to have a very limited understanding of Who Jesus is and what He means. Many people are at the stage of *Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.* Today, we remember the people whose funerals we have taken and we have to bear in mind the fact that the bereaved may be at different stages on their journey into faith – affirming and encouraging what is true, gently correcting what is false. Simple faith is good. Faith is simple. We trust God even more certainly than a young child trusts His parents. Simple and potentially profound. Our simple faith is deepened as we grow to know God better.

November 3rd

I Corinthians 3 vv 3-9

Fifty years ago, the Vicar of St Nicholas Durham led a church the congregation of which trebled in size. The Holy Spirit was evidently moving in a marvellous way. The vicar himself was quite rightly appreciated for his contribution and Christians in other churches looked to him for guidance regarding how their own churches might grow both in number and in effectiveness in doing God's work. Eventually, the vicar in question was made Archbishop of Canterbury.

I remember, however, a letter in a newspaper from a long-standing member of the congregation of St Nicholas. He wanted to remind everybody that the foundations on which George Carey built at Durham had been established by his predecessor (and, no doubt, members of the congregation, perhaps going back decades).

It is an indication of immaturity in a congregation if people are too devoted to the minister or if they make invidious comparisons. If people say either that they come to church because they like me or stay away because they don't like me, I remind them that we come to church to worship God, not the Rector! All Christians have direct access to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. We do not depend on any human mediator except Jesus, Who is, of course, also divine. Mature Christians should know this!

November 4th

I Corinthians 3 vv 10-15

Paul was a wise master builder. He laid the foundation of the Church at Corinth – Jesus Christ. Jesus is the foundation of every Church. If Jesus is not the foundation, then the congregation is not a Church. How can we build on the foundation which is Christ? Have faith. Keep His commandments. What is His commandment? That we love one another.

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.

Yet she on earth hath union
With God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won.
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we
Like them, the meek and lowly,
On high may dwell with thee.

November 5th (Trinity 22)

I Corinthians 3 vv 16&17

Ye are the Temple of God. The Spirit of God dwelleth in you.

How might we defile the Temple Of God? One answer is, of course, by sexual sin. That is mentioned explicitly elsewhere in the Bible. But there is much more to it than that. Any sin defiles the Temple of God. Insofar as we break any of the commandments, not just the seventh, we defile ourselves. Wherever love falls short, we sin and sin always defiles. God certainly forgives us our sins when we ask Him to. We also need to seek His grace to abstain from sin.

We also defile the Temple of God when we sin against other Christians. *This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.* Today, we reflect on the Gunpowder Plot and the savage punishments meted out to the culprits. Remember, remember that both plotters and plotted against were Christians who regarded themselves as doing God's work.

LORD, we beseech thee to keep thy household the Church in continual godliness; that through thy protection it may be free from all adversities, and devoutly given to serve thee in good works, to the glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

November 6th

I Corinthians 3 vv 18-22

It is folly to idolize any human being – even great preachers, pastors and ministers of the Gospel. None of them can save us. They can only point us to the One Who can and will save us if only we turn to Him. As I was composing yesterday's reading, I thought of these words from a prayer I say every day. *More especially, we pray for the good estate of the Catholick Church; that it may be so guided and governed by thy good Spirit, that all who profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life.* Bear in mind that Catholic in this sense means not only Roman Catholic, but us Anglicans, Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal, United Reformed, Methodist – all Christians in fact. We're all part of God's Catholic Church and we pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit to act accordingly.

November 7th

I Corinthians 3 v23

And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.

That's what so many people miss. It's a tremendous privilege to be a Christian.

November 8th

I Corinthians 4 vv 1&2

Paul's authority over the Corinthian Christians had been challenged. The Corinthians had split themselves up into factions. Some of them no longer believed in the plain truths of the Gospel, including the fact that Jesus is risen from the dead. Some of them thought that freedom from sin meant freedom to behave any way you please, even in the most disgusting ways, rather than realising that Christian freedom is freedom to live a good life. This is why quite a lot of the epistle is about the position of Christian ministers, but much of what Paul says about ministers would be true for all Christians. Paul – preacher, apostle, teacher, healer, theologian, letter writer, leader, wise man, exemplar, master builder, presiding at worship, martyr – was a steward of the mysteries of God. Paul had received everything necessary for carrying out his ministry from God. As a steward, it was his calling to take care of the gifts and opportunities God gave him and to use them wisely to God's glory, for the well-being of the Church and in proclaiming God's love to the world. All ministers of religion are stewards of God's mysteries. I am a steward of God's mysteries and it is my responsibility to treasure what he has entrusted to me and to use His gifts in accordance with His Will, my vocation. When you think about it, however, all Christians have a vocation. You have been called by God to serve Him and to perform the good works He has prepared for you. You too are a steward of God's

mysteries, responsible for treasuring what God has given you and using your opportunities and talents to do His Will and accomplish His purposes.

November 9th

I Corinthians 4 vv 3&4

People can be very judgmental about us. Sometimes, we are our own harshest judges. Other people's judgment of us, our own judgment of ourselves, can be a heavy weight to bear. But, in the end, it isn't what other people think of us that counts or even what we think of ourselves. It is our merciful God Who is our judge. I find that very liberating.

November 10th

I Corinthians 4 v5

Some of us like the idea of a traditional village community where we all know one another and there is always a helping hand. Generally speaking, I'd go along with that, but such close communities also have a downside. Everybody knows your business. People are inclined to gossip, sometimes judging harshly. Feuds can go on for generations – long after everyone has forgotten the reason for them. Some people, therefore, prefer the anonymity of a town, where you might not know your neighbours, they aren't interested in you and you get to choose whom you mix with. The internet recreates the village community to some extent. People over share. People are quick to judge. But the internet can also be a place where you find support, help and well meant advice.

We should leave judgment to God. We ought not to judge other people. We ought not to worry too much about how they judge us. We can and should be supportive of one another and taken a kindly interest in one another's welfare, but also know when to respect other people's privacy.

Mathew 7¹²: *all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.*

November 11th (Armistice Day)

I Corinthians 4 v6

*And these things, brethren, I have in a measure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes, **that ye might not think of men above that which is written, that no-one of you be puffed up one against another.***

A sycophant remarked to Queen Victoria that it was impossible to pray "too often or too sincerely for your majesty's family." The Queen responded that she was grateful for sincerity but that frequency was beside the point. The two minutes' silence was originally always observed on 11th November. Then it was thought better to observe it on the nearest Sunday, which some people thought was wrong. So now many people keep the silence twice – once on 11th, once on the Sunday. We've also got into the habit of keeping silence to mark other solemn events. I'm a bit concerned that too greater frequency detracts from the sincerity with which we observe these rites. The Act of Remembrance honours all the war dead equally, whether general or private. All who contribute in whatever way are entitled to be equally valued.

November 12th (Trinity 23, Remembrance Sunday) I Corinthians 4 v7

For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?

Whoever you are reading this, you have talents, resources and opportunities which are vouchsafed to no-one else. You are unique and the circumstances of your life are unique to you. Everything comes from God. So, whatever you have is God's gift to you. You have your unique part in His plan for the world. The same is true for every other Christian. You are not more valuable than they are. They are not more valuable than you. We are all infinitely valuable. Everything each one of us has is God's gift to us and our calling is to offer everything we have, our very selves, back to Him. Those whom we commemorate today made the ultimate sacrifice. None us probably will die a martyr's death, but our offering of ourselves, *our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice*, ought to be no less complete than theirs.

O GOD, our refuge and strength, who art the author of all godliness; Be ready, we beseech thee, to hear the devout prayers of thy Church; and grant that those things which we ask faithfully we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

November 13th

I Corinthians 4 vv 8-14

After the Conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the year 312, the Church became more and more part of the Establishment. Instead of being despised and persecuted, Christians came to be regarded as

respected members of the community. Bishops and other clergy were important people in the state as well as in the Church. In many ways, the influence of the Church on the state was good, striving for peace, providing education, hospital care and welfare. It is also true that the Church was corrupted by the temptations of wealth and power. Bishops lived in palaces like members of the aristocracy and took their seats in the House of Lords. Some nineteenth century commentators made a great deal of the office of a bishop – pastor, preacher, priest, missionary, teacher, leader, focus for Christian unity – but suggested that it would do the bishops good and enable them to be much more effective in their very important ministry if they were to be divested of their wealth, civic power and comfort and to face persecution. After all, there were millions of people in Victorian Britain living out their lives in squalor. Were the bishops really servants of the people as Jesus came to serve or were they more like the people's overlords?

In St Paul's time, it seems to have been the other way round. The apostles were facing ignominy and persecution and struggling to support themselves while, at least in Corinth when Paul wrote this letter, other Christians were complacent about their circumstances.

So, what do you think? Is it a good thing to have bishops and other prominent Christians in high places, occupying positions of power and influence, having resources such as money and buildings and administrative staff at their disposal, so that they can exert pressure on government to govern wisely and well and provide aid for those in need? Or would the Church have more effect if she (and, in particular, her ministers) were poor and persecuted? Our bishops & other clergy certainly do need our prayers as do all Christian people that every one of us may do the good works God has prepared for us to walk in.

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.*

November 14th

I Corinthians 4 vv 14-17

Hundreds of years before Paul, the prophet Isaiah told the people of God: *Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged.* Our faith has firm foundations. God has made Himself known in the Law and the Prophets. In the Old Testament, we have the story of God's dealings with the world in general and His people in particular and the myriad things He revealed to them. We have the New Testament – the Gospels, Acts, the Epistles and the Book of Revelation. Every stone in the Temple is part of the whole, supported by the others and playing its part in supporting them. The foundation and the keystone is Christ. Individuals and whole churches too easily depart from this deposit of faith chasing new ideas and new doctrines, but it is a terrible mistake to do so. We can only build on the foundation already laid – which is Christ.

November 15th

I Corinthians 4 vv 18-21

We're back to this question of authority. All Christians possess the Holy Spirit. Everyone of us is a temple of the Spirit. So why should we submit to any other authority? Why should Corinthian Christians obey Paul? Why should you and I not make up our own mind about everything – what we should believe, how we should behave? After all, we have the Holy Spirit, everyone of us.

Moreover, the Corinthian Church had some right to claim autonomy. Where two or three meet in His Name, Christ is present. What other authority does a local Church need? Why should we in our village Church submit to the diocese or the connexion or the district?

And what was Paul going to do about it anyway? He was miles away. He could write strong letters. Perhaps, even if he were present, his presence wouldn't back up his powerful words.

It is, of course, true that every Christian has the Holy Spirit and that Christ is present in every local congregation, but, again we are all different. We have different gifts because we have different functions in the Body of Christ. We are not all leaders or teachers or pastors or theologians or missionaries or apostles. If we are to be one in Christ – as Christ prays that we should be – we have to accept the authority of those whom calling is to lead.

St Paul wrote to the Ephesians: *And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of*

the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

We are members one of another. We each belong to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church and her life depends on accepting not only our own place in God's plan, but the role of everybody else, which includes our rulers in the faith.

November 16th

I Corinthians 5 vv 1&2

We are set free in Christ – set free from sin, set free from the fear of death, but what does freedom mean? Does it mean that we are free to behave in any manner we please, however vile? Certainly not. Being set free from sin not only means being forgiven for our past sins, but being free to sin no more. Perfect freedom is not anarchy, a lawlessness which ultimately destroys us and damages the people around us. Perfect freedom is God's service – to live one's life in accordance with the commandments of Him Who is perfect love.

O GOD, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom; Defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

November 17th

I Corinthians 5 vv 3-5

What this man has done is horrible. It is also horrible that some of the Christians at Corinth have so misinterpreted what it means to be saved by faith that they were prepared to celebrate what they saw as this man's God-given freedom to behave in a way which even pagans would deplore. True freedom is to serve God, which means to keep the commandments, all summed up in the command to love. The Church has to be protected from the influence of this man. The man himself has to learn the difference between right & wrong!

November 18th

I Corinthians 5 vv 6&7

The Church has to be protected from vile sin and this principle may very occasionally necessitate the exclusion of a vile sinner. But powers like excommunication and disfellowshipping have been used far too frequently. It is a very terrible thing to be excluded from the Church and it shouldn't happen to anyone unless there really is no alternative. Moreover, the hope and prayer must always be that the sinner will repent and return to the fold. Those judging must be very careful to remember that they too are sinners and only justified by the grace of God. They must not be self-righteous, but humble. They must examine their own motives – that they are truly acting for the good both of the Church and the one who has gone wrong. Galatians 6: *Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For each one shall bear his own load.*

November 19th (Trinity 24)

I Corinthians 5 vv 7&8

It is remarkable how yeast works, generating carbon dioxide and alcohol from sugar. In drinks, it is the alcohol which is appreciated. In bread it is the carbon dioxide which aerates the loaf. It doesn't take much yeast to leaven a lump. In the Bible, this is used as a metaphor for both good and bad transformations. As Christians, as the Church, we are called to be leaven transforming the world for good – so that the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of God. But yeast can also be a metaphor for sin. We must purge ourselves and our churches of sin. Otherwise we risk ourselves and our churches becoming worse & worse. **O LORD**, we beseech thee, absolve thy people from their offences; that through thy bountiful goodness we may all be delivered from the bands of those sins, which by our frailty we have committed: Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our blessed Lord and Saviour. *Amen.*

November 20th

I Corinthians 5 vv 9-13

We have to live in the world. We go to work or school. We socialise with other people. If we only mixed with non-Christians, how could we serve as leaven? How could we share our faith with people we never met. Jesus was well-known for consorting with "publicans and sinners". But it is not tolerable for the

Church if her members are unrepentant sinners. The Church cannot compromise the Law of Love which God has revealed to us with the lower standards of the world. As Christians, we have to mix with people in order to share with them the gift of eternal life which God has given us. We also have to beware of adopting their attitudes or imitating their behaviour where it falls short of the Christ-like perfection to which we are called. It may sometimes be necessary to separate from the sinner. But self-righteousness is also a sin.

Matthew 7: ³ *And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?*⁴ *Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?*

⁵ *Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.*

November 21st

I Corinthians 6 vv 1-8

The Church of England is famously *by law established*. What we may teach, how we worship are constrained by law. There are complicated property rights guaranteed by law. There are laws regarding how we may maintain or improve our buildings. Because we are the Established Church, Canon Law (Church law) is mixed up with and has the same force as Common Law and Statute Law. In the light of what St Paul says here, can this be a good thing? Can't we sort out our differences in love? I'm afraid the answer is that fallen humanity cannot live without law. Even Christians will not be made perfect until the resurrection of the just. Till then, the flesh lusts against the Spirit. We can be only too human in our disputes and differences of opinion and proper legal procedures enforced by recognised human authority are still needed to save ourselves from ourselves. I do think, however, that we should not lose sight of the ideal set forth here by Paul. We ought not to fall out with one another and, if we do, we ought to be able to sort out our differences prayerfully and lovingly.

November 22nd

I Corinthians 6 vv 9&10

Until recently, St Paul's words here would have been uncontroversial. Saved by grace, our sins forgiven, set free, born again, crucified with Christ, it naturally follows that we no longer live as sinners. Controversy arises because *effeminate, abusers of themselves with mankind* has traditionally been taken to mean homosexual sex and that has been regarded as a sin. Over the last couple of decades, there has been a huge change in public attitudes to homosexuality. We have moved from a shocking persecution of homosexuals to tolerance to legal recognition of gay marriage. The Church of England, as I write, is considering three options: to keep to our current teaching that gay sex is a sin; to celebrate gay weddings; to refuse to conduct gay weddings, but to bless gay couples. Some people suggest that Paul is not condemning faithful gay relationships, but promiscuity and exploitation, but I find that hard to believe. There was no gay marriage in biblical or Roman law. There is very little doubt in my mind that the only proper place for sex is in a lifelong heterosexual marriage. On the other hand, it isn't my place to judge, and certainly not to persecute, those who come to a different conclusion. If you ask me, I'll email a much longer response.

November 23rd

I Corinthians 6 v11

If you were brought up "respectable" like me, you probably weren't spectacular sinners like those described in the last couple of verses. More's the pity, there aren't many former burglars, violent drunks or extortioners in our congregations. I say "more's the pity" because our mission is the rehabilitation of offenders. Most of us are "respectable" sinners in the sense that our sins are ones which society regards as not very serious – like jealousy, gossip, greed, materialism, an unforgiving attitude, selfishness, lack of consideration for others, unhealthy ambition or whatever. We may not recognise our own need for repentance. And, if we do repent of these less spectacular sins, other people might not notice. Nevertheless, for God's sake, and our own, we must repent of all sin and aspire to live lives of perfect love for all people.

November 24th

I Corinthians 6 v12

As Christians, we are set free from sin and the fear of death. There are many customs and religious practices which don't really matter. In New Testament times, the Church came to understand that prohibitions against eating pork or too great a scrupulousness about eating what might have been offered in sacrifice to an idol no longer mattered to mature Christians. But there could be reasons for observing them – especially not to offend the consciences of other people. It isn't necessary to kneel to pray or to stand for the Creed or for the minister to wear special robes but it may be right to do so if that helps us to focus on God and to express our devotion to Him and also if not to do so, would offend others. There is a solidarity in a congregation which

sits, kneels and stands at the same points in the service and observes the same customs and gestures, but differences of opinion and practice in these matters are no reason to argue with other people or to embarrass them. These are *things indifferent*. We are free to choose what we do about *things indifferent*, but not if our choices damage other people's faith. I'd quite happily preside at the Eucharist in shorts and tee shirt, but, in most contexts, that would be unhelpful to other worshippers. To be honest, wearing the prescribed vestments also helps me to focus.

Some things, however, are not things indifferent. Christian freedom does not extend to freedom to sin, for example to commit fornication.

November 25th

I Corinthians 6 vv 13-19

We are members of the Body of Christ in the sense that we belong to Him and He belongs to us. We are members of His Church which is His Body. We are also members of Christ's Body in the sense that we are His hands and eyes and legs etc.. We each have our distinctive part to play as His Body. The Church is also God's Temple. The Church is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. We are the living stones comprising His Temple, Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. As individuals, too, we are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are the dwelling place of God. It is therefore horrible that our bodies – God's Temples – should be contaminated by fornication or any other kind of sin. Paul's words about one flesh remind us of marriage. A man and his wife are one flesh. They have responsibilities towards one another. To become one flesh with another human being in a casual relationship is a travesty of God's intention for us. There is also a responsibility involved. There might be pregnancy. There might arise emotional needs. In the case mentioned in v16, surely there is a responsibility if one is complicit in a woman selling herself whether from choice or necessity.

November 26th (Trinity 25)

I Corinthians 6 v20

For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. In many ways, I think the problem with the Church and with our individual Christian lives is that we undervalue ourselves. We are bought with a price and that price is Christ's Blood. We are infinitely valuable. We are not in a casual relationship with Christ. He has given Himself to us. Our response ought never to be less than to give ourselves unreservedly to Him.

STIR up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

November 27th

I Corinthians 7 vv 1-9

Paul was single and considered it best for Christians to remain single. Single Christians are free to dedicate themselves entirely to God's service, without the distractions of family responsibilities. They can travel freely. They only have to earn enough to support themselves. If they should lose their lives because of their Christian faithfulness, they have no bereaved family to worry about.

On the other hand, marriage goes right back to the beginning. God creates Eve for Adam, that they should cleave to one another as one flesh. Jesus Himself, also unmarried, commends the estate of matrimony. The implication of what both Jesus and Paul say is that some are called to be celibate and others (presumably the majority) are called to marriage. Those who are married have the responsibility of meeting all one another's needs.

The Book of Common Prayer lists *the causes for which Matrimony was ordained. 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.* I should say that this view of marriage is firmly based on what the Bible teaches.

For most of human history, the challenge has been to maintain the population in the face of losses caused by such things as poverty, sickness and battle. So our marriage customs are designed for the procreation and care of children, their being born into stable, loving families, where possible with the care of both parents.

Our natural instincts are to be directed to that end. Families – husbands and wives – exist to care for one another, no matter what.

In the twenty first century, it could be argued that our problem is over-population – too many children being born. Safe, effective contraception makes it possible to have relationships (and even casual encounters) in which there is no expectation of there being progeny. As a last resort, we in more prosperous societies, have the resources to provide for unwanted children, abandoned wives and all the casualties of our human frailty.

All that being so, do we still need the traditional framework of marriage? Why shouldn't gay couples have the blessing of *the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other*, even though they can't have children by straightforward means? Why should ill-treated husbands or wives remain faithful in failing relationships or adverse circumstances? If contraception is safe and effective, does it really matter if people sleep together without first making the commitment of marriage?

These questions seem to constitute the framework in which traditional values have been challenged. If the reasons for traditional marriage no longer have the force they once did, is it loving to enforce those values on our fellow citizens or our fellow church members? On the other hand, what if those traditional values are really fundamental to human flourishing? Is it really loving to set them to one side and support people in kinds of relationship and practices which have for millennia been believed to be wrong? I find it hard to refuse people what they believe to be right for themselves. On the other hand, I sense that the breakdown of biblical standards with respect to matters regarding identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage is leading to the breakdown of society. Over to you.

November 28th

I Corinthians 7 vv 10-16

The teaching is clear – that members of the people of God, whether ancient Israel or the Church – should not marry unbelievers. If they do, the two most important things in their lives are pulling in different directions. But what if you are already married to an unbeliever when you become a Christian? Paul says that, ideally, you should remain. Divorce is not an option. By remaining the Christian is instrumental in sanctifying the whole household – by example and teaching obviously, perhaps also because God works mysteriously through that mystical union Himself to sanctify the whole family. But, Paul acknowledges, the unbelieving husband or wife might depart and then you would no longer be *under bondage*. What does that mean – just free not to live in the same household and to live as a single person, or free to marry again? To be honest, this isn't clear. In the light of v8, I should think that Paul's counsel would be to remain single in such a case.

November 29th

I Corinthians 7 vv 17-24

Most of us were brought up as Christians. We were at least brought up in a Christian country. So we are not as conscious as were those pagans converted by St Paul's preaching of the fundamental difference it makes to our lives when we come to know the Lord Jesus. Christian conversion is a complete reorientation of our lives. We have an entirely different goal from that of unbelievers. We have different means by which we hope to attain our goal. So, some of them must have thought, having become a Christian, do I also leave my wife, leave my job, abandon all my former attachments? Not at all, says Paul. Unless what you are doing is sinful, continue in your duties as a husband and an employer or employee. Don't give up your heritage in so far as it can contribute to your growth as a Christian. "Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it." Nice thought that the slave is to remember that he is free in Christ and the Master has to remember that he is Christ's slave.

November 30th (S Andrew)

I Corinthians 7 v 23

Ye are bought with a price; be not ye servants of men.

Today is my birthday. I am glad I belong to Jesus. In Him I have all that I need. What He wants from me is my love. I don't have to worry about sin, the world and the devil, because I have that peace which the world cannot give. That's true for you too if you, like me and the Apostle Andrew, seek God's grace in following His Son.

ALMIGHTY God, who didst give such grace unto thy holy Apostle Saint Andrew, that he readily obeyed the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him without delay; Grant unto us all, that we, being called by

thy holy Word, may forthwith give up ourselves obediently to fulfil the holy commandments; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

December 1st

I Corinthians 8 vv 1-3

Knowledge puffeth up but charity edifieth.

The question of eating meat offered to idols is not likely to arise in many churches today. But the principle applies in many areas of church life. *Knowledge puffeth up but charity edifieth.* We may know or think we know that we are right. (This is a special temptation for us clergy with all our training and experience.) Insisting on what we know to be right (and perhaps regarding those who disagree with us as lacking in spiritual awareness) may be uncharitable. Maybe someone has scruples about what other people (who are sure they know better) regard as things indifferent. I once belonged to a church whose building doubled as a hall. Some people regarded it as perfectly acceptable to lay out the altar with goods for sale at the church fete. For others, this was sacrilege. Charity (love) would require that those who could see no harm in using the altar as a table would have respected those who found it offensive to do so and those who felt strongly that, having been consecrated and used for the celebration of Holy Communion, the altar could not appropriately be used for other purposes would have tried to understand those who thought otherwise.

December 2nd

I Corinthians 8 vv 4-13

Life is very precious, a gift from God. Many cultures recognise this when they kill animals for food, whether hunting or the slaughter of farm animals. There is and ought to be a reverence for life. Hence kosher and halal slaughter in Jewish and Muslim communities, the Old Testament prohibition on eating blood and various rituals around killing animals and sacrifice in pagan communities. Some people in this country are uncomfortable with the thought that the meat they are eating might have been kosher or halal. They have doubts about the welfare of the animals concerned and perhaps with the religious and cultural overtones. In the ancient world, much of the meat would have been offered as a sacrifice to pagan gods. Eating the sacrificed animal, one would be participating in the god's feast. Some Christians thought therefore that they would be compromising their faith in the one true God by eating this meat offered to pagan idols. Others, like Paul, knew that the pagan gods aren't real. So it didn't matter if Christians ate their offerings. What did matter, however, was to respect everybody in love.

December 3rd (Advent Sunday)

I Corinthians 9 vv 1-6

As most readers of these notes know, I'm having to contemplate retirement on account of my advanced years. The question then arises, who will succeed me? Only God knows the future. We must pray that those responsible receive the grace to make an appointment in accordance with His Will. But there will be comparisons. Paul wasn't like Cephas (Peter). Paul & Barnabas had a different lifestyle and approach to ministry from that of Peter and the Lord's brothers (James, Joseph, Simon & Jude, for example). My successor won't be like me as I'm unlike the men who went before me. We're not to judge or make comparisons. We're to receive from our ministers the gifts which God has given to them for our benefit, which are very often different from those of their predecessors or colleagues.

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

December 4th

I Corinthians 9 vv 7-11

When we decided to try streaming services on the internet, we were told that we must pay for the copyright if we used music and other content produced by others. There is a cut price arrangement for churches using Christian copyright material, but still we must pay. One's first thought is why? If people have received from God gifts such as being able to write and perform great hymns and if they sincerely want to use these gifts to glorify God and in the service of the Church, why should they expect to be paid in *filthy lucre*? Well, of course, the answer is that they have to eat, their children need school uniforms, there's a house to be paid for. If we want people to serve full time in Christian work, we have to pay them enough to support themselves. How much we should pay them is another issue: just enough to live on, sufficient to show our

appreciation of their ministry; enough for them to hold up their heads in a society which judges people according to where they live, how they dress and what car they drive?

December 5th

I Corinthians 9 vv 12-15

While Paul is definite that ministers are entitled to be paid by the Church, he himself chose not to be paid. He supported himself as a tentmaker. We have what we call Self Supporting Ministers in the Church today. A SSM is not a financial burden on the Church. A SSF perhaps understands ordinary people better because he has to work under the same conditions they do and face the same issues such as paying the rent or mortgage. He may be able to act informally (or even formally) as a sort of chaplain in the work place – reaching people those of us who live in rectories find it hard to reach.

December 6th

I Corinthians 9 vv 16-19

Paul didn't need paying to preach the Gospel. He couldn't help himself. He loved God so much, he was so full of the Holy Spirit, he cared so much about the welfare of his fellow human beings, that he couldn't help but preach the Word, at no matter what cost to himself. It was a missionary strategy not to become a financial burden on his hearers. The only reward Paul wanted for himself was to glorify God by proclaiming Jesus to the world. Pray for those of us who are "professional" ministers that we may have the same zeal as Paul for God and the Gospel and for the salvation of souls.

December 7th

I Corinthians 9 vv 20&21

Earlier today, I was in correspondence with a free lance journalist about how to go about writing in a national newspaper about matters of Christian faith. Not so very long ago, one could assume both an acquaintance with the Christian story on the part of one's readers & a general benevolence towards Christian teaching even from unbelievers. Nowadays, there is quite a lot of hostility from a vocal minority & a more general ignorance about matters of faith. So what do we say that is interesting, challenging & intelligible? We need to be close enough to people that we can understand their aspirations and anxieties, close enough to them that they recognise us as people who genuinely understand and care about them, but we also have to show them *the more excellent way*, the good news of faith & hope & love which Jesus has given to us to share. Pray for Christians in the media and in education and wherever they can make a difference by the way they carry out their professions.

December 8th

I Corinthians 9 v22

*To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made **all things to all men**, that I might by all means save some.*

When we use the phrase *all things to all men*, we (or at least I) are apt to use it pejoratively. It seems to suggest a lack of integrity. A politician described as *all things to all men* sounds to me like someone you wouldn't trust. I remember a prominent politician visiting this parish some time ago and giving us the impression that neither he nor his party would support a certain development. When he returned to London, both he and his party put their support behind the development in question. Yet Paul is pleased to be *all things to all men*. He wants to be able to communicate, to share, with everybody – no matter what their religion, culture, degree of education, social status, occupation or place of residence. The Good News of Jesus is for absolutely everybody. Yet how can I, how can you be *all things to all men* without compromising the person you are? Can I, say, sit in with a group of people, all of whom are agreeing about something which I believe to be wrong? Should I challenge them? Should I walk out? Should I keep quiet and let them think I agree with them? What if they ask me straight out what I think? I don't want to be excluded from the group. How can I reach them with the Gospel if I walk out or am thrown out? On the other hand, what's the point of sitting with them unless I behave with complete integrity?

December 9th

I Corinthians 9 v23

And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.

Having been in Cuxton and Halling for so many years, I quite often think of the many people (including my own family members) who formerly sat in these pews but now worship on another shore. When we say *Therefore with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven*, these people are, by God's grace, among that heavenly host. One of the prayers we say at a funeral is *that it may please thee, of thy gracious goodness, shortly to accomplish the number of thine elect, and to hasten thy kingdom; that we, with*

all those that are departed in the true faith of thy holy Name, may have our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in thy eternal and everlasting glory. As Rector, I'm instrumental, by God's grace, in bringing this to pass – that you and I should share in God's Kingdom.

December 10th (Advent 2)

I Corinthians 9 vv 24-27

One year the person who came first in the Gillingham Marathon was disqualified because he had not followed the correct course. He had actually run farther than the rest of us because someone had moved the route marker. Paul talks about the Christian life as like running a race. Professional athletes subject themselves to the most stringent of training regimes, diets, etc.. They give up a lot of the things that other young people enjoy. Sometimes, they suffer injuries which affect the rest of their lives. Some cheat by using drugs to their own detriment and to that of the whole sport. And for what? Only one can win. All he gets (in Roman times) is an evergreen wreath or (in more modern times) a medal and maybe (in Roman times) profits from gambling or (more recently) sponsorship deals and media contracts. In contrast, everyone is a winner in Christ and the prize is eternal life. We should surely, therefore, be more strenuous in following Jesus even than a top athlete striving to win Olympic gold. God supplies us with the means of grace – Christian fellowship, prayer, Holy Communion, and so much more, everything we need. We are saved by grace through faith. We are free to *run the straight race through God's good grace. Lay hold on life, and it shall be your joy and crown eternally.* But what of the course. How can we avoid disqualifying ourselves by taking the wrong route like that unfortunate young man in the Gillingham Marathon? Well, today is Bible Sunday.

BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

1 Fight the good fight with all thy might,
Christ is thy strength and Christ thy right.
Lay hold on life, and it shall be
thy joy and crown eternally.

3 Cast care aside, lean on thy guide;
his boundless mercy will provide.
Lean, and the trusting soul shall prove
Christ is its life and Christ its love.

2 Run the straight race through God's good grace;
lift up thine eyes, and seek his face.
Life with its way before us lies;
Christ is the path and Christ the prize.

4 Faint not, nor fear, his arms are near;
he changes not, and thou art dear.
Only believe, and thou shalt see
that Christ is Lord eternally.

December 11th

I Corinthians 10 vv 1-4

Paul draws a parallel between our lives as Christians and the story of the Exodus. In Christ, by the shedding of the Blood of the Paschal Lamb, we are set free from slavery to sin and the fear of death. Just as the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea, we are baptised in the Name of Jesus. We are now in an in between place. We are in the world, but no longer of the world. We have not yet attained to the Promised Land. But God looks after us. We led by the Holy Spirit, as the Israelites were led by the pillar of cloud and fire. We are nourished by Christ, the Bread of Life, as they received the manna. Christ feeds us in many ways, but Holy Communion is most significant. *Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day* They drank water from the Rock. Jesus supplies the Water of Life. *Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.*

Note that Paul repeats the word “all” five times. We belong to the people of God. I love Jesus. We love Jesus. We are all one in Christ.

December 12th

I Corinthians 10 vv 5-8

We are indeed baptised into one Body, just as all the Israelites passed through the Red Sea. *We, being many, are one bread and one body.* But many of those Israelites sinned against God and suffered the consequences in the Wilderness. In fact, none of those who escaped from Egypt made it to the Promised Land except Joshua and Caleb because they did not have faith in God's promises. These things are a warning to the New Israel, the Christian Church. We are required to remain faithful to the One in Whom we believe.

December 13th

I Corinthians 10 v9

This verse refers to a story in Numbers 21. The Israelites had had enough of wandering in the Wilderness. Life was hard. They were fed up with having nothing but manna to eat. They complained against Moses. They complained against God. God sent poisonous snakes among them and many died. The people confessed that they were sinners and God told Moses to make a bronze snake and set it up on a pole. Anyone who was bitten by the live snakes was saved from death if he looked at the snake on the pole. In John 3, this is revealed to be a figure of Christ. When we turn to Christ on the Cross, our sins are forgiven and we escape their consequence, death.

I suspect some of you may disagree with me regarding what I'm now going to write. The manna stands for Jesus the Bread of Life. It stands for the Holy Communion which He commanded us to perform in remembrance of Him. The Israelites who complained about the manna were accused of rejecting God and Moses (who himself prefigures Christ). So why are some Christians (many Christians) so resistant to participating regularly in the Sacrament? Some are afraid that they will receive the Sacrament unworthily (ie not in a state of grace, not truly repentant of their sins and in love and charity with their neighbours). Some feel that it cheapens the Sacrament to celebrate it too frequently and perhaps without proper preparation. Some people point out that taking part in a Holy Communion service demands total commitment. People who are not yet ready to take up their cross and follow Him might be more comfortable with Mattins or an informal service, coming to know Jesus better by attending church regularly before finally committing totally. Others just find Mattins, Evensong or an informal service simply more enjoyable than our Communion rite. And some Christians just don't realise why attending Church is more important than most other things they may get up to in the course of a week.

My response would be that all Christians should be totally committed to the Christian life and ready to receive Jesus whenever He comes to us and in whatever way He chooses. We should always be repentant of our sins and in love & charity with our neighbours. Jesus commanded us to participate in Holy Communion. When we do so, we bear witness to the Truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know the Truth of Christ. Other services are great, but in addition to, not instead of the one Jesus instructed us to perform. And, as for all the other things we do in the course of a week, we receive the strength to perform our duties solely through our encounter with Christ.

1 My God, and is thy table spread,
and doth thy cup with love o'erflow?
Thither be all thy children led,
and let them all thy sweetness know.

2 Hail, sacred feast which Jesus makes,
rich banquet of his flesh and blood!
Thrice happy he who here partakes
that sacred stream, that heavenly food.

3 Why are its bounties all in vain
before unwilling hearts. displayed?
Was not for them the Victim slain?
Are they forbid the children's bread?
4 O let thy table honoured be,
and furnished well with joyful guests;
and may each soul salvation see,
that here its sacred pledges tastes

December 14th

I Corinthians 10 v10

Having written at some length about the last verse, I shan't say too much about this one, which has a similar theme. The Israelites murmured in the wilderness. They were never satisfied. Nothing was ever good enough for them. They forgot what God had done for them in the past. They were ungrateful. They didn't trust His promises. They were unfaithful. How true that is of so many of us Christians and how destructive it is of the worship, the unity and the pastoral and missionary effectiveness of the Church.

December 15th

I Corinthians 10 vv 11-13

Having studied the first twelve verses of this chapter, we might well be concerned. Are we complacent, unthankful, unfaithful, sinful? We do need to be on our guard. It's so easy to lapse from the purity of devotion to Jesus. Are we in peril of disqualifying ourselves from our membership of God's people by our defiance or indifference to Him? We have to ask ourselves. Yet we know two things. We know that, the moment we repent of our sins, we are forgiven and we know that God will not suffer us to be tempted beyond that which we are able.

December 16th

I Corinthians 10 v14

Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.

Idolatry is worshipping anything which is less than God. The ancient world literally worshipped images made of wood or metal or stone. People felt comfortable doing this. Taking part in the cult made them feel part of something. Worshipping the idol, they hoped, would make their lives better. In the modern world, we enjoy a sense of belonging when we go along with the crowd, sharing the same values and customs as the people we mix with. The internet and magazines are full of suggestions for things that will make our lives better – beauty, diet, fashion, exercise, money, fame, etc.. What matters is to belong to God's Church and it is only He Who can meet our real needs.

December 17th (Advent 3)

I Corinthians 10 v16

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

The word translated *communion* here is *koinonia* (κοινωνία). It is often translated *fellowship*. In Holy Communion, we are in fellowship with Christ in God and with one another. This is both why we should participate regularly and frequently and the reason why we should not participate unworthily.

December 18th

I Corinthians 10 v17

For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. The Church is essentially one whether we are Orthodox or Western, Roman Catholic or Protestant. Whatever we are, so long as we believe in Jesus - the Son of God the Father from Whom proceeds the Holy Spirit, born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, crucified, ascended, glorified - we are members of that one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. God is love. The unity of the Trinity, Father, Son & Holy Spirit is the unity of love. The union of Christ with humanity is the unity of love. It follows that our Christian unity is the unity of love. Whatever is not of love is sin.

December 19th

I Corinthians 10 vv 18-22

Sacrificed meat is normally eaten by the worshippers. They are experiencing table fellowship with God (in the case of Old Testament sacrifices) or with the false gods worshipped by idolaters. While we have to be very careful about the use of the language of sacrifice when we speak of Holy Communion (because what Christ accomplished on Calvary is the true sacrifice which we both remember and present to God & the people) the thought is similar – table fellowship with God. Table fellowship with God is incompatible with fellowship with sin.

December 20th

I Corinthians 10 vv 23&24

Paul knows that the pagans' idols are nothing. They have no power. It can't hurt those of us who know this to eat anything offered to these non-entities. It would be perfectly lawful for us who know these things to do so, but not expedient. We have to consider other people who do worry about eating what is offered to idols. Maybe, they haven't themselves shaken off the superstition that the pagan gods are in some sense real. Perhaps they are afraid that it is a bad witness if we appear to take part in what other people regard as table fellowship with a false god. It was obviously a cause of division in the Church at Corinth. In Romans 14 Paul says it would be better to become vegetarians and total abstainers than to offend other people's consciences and so to damage their relationship with Jesus & divide the Church. We might feel superior, perhaps, towards people who have scruples which we don't share, but we have to ask ourselves whether in fact they could be right and to remember that, even if we are right and they are wrong, we have nothing, no insight, which we did not receive from God.

December 21st (St Thomas)

I Corinthians 10 vv 25-28

ALMIGHTY and everliving God, who for the more confirmation of the faith didst suffer thy holy Apostle Thomas to be doubtful in thy Son's resurrection; Grant us so perfectly, and without all doubt, to believe in thy Son Jesus Christ, that our faith in thy sight may never be reprov'd. Hear us, O Lord, through the same Jesus Christ, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, now and for evermore. *Amen.*

What really matters then is faith in Jesus. If we have faith in Him, we are witnesses to the world of His Truth and we love one another as He loves us. So how do we apply these principles to practical concerns?

Paul considers what to do living as we do in a world dominated by pagan ideas. Don't go out of your way to make a fuss. You know that meat offered in pagan sacrifice can't hurt. So don't look for trouble. Buy what's on sale at the butcher's. Eat what's put in front of you if you're invited to someone else's house for dinner. But if they try to inveigle you into affirming their idolatry, have none of it.

December 22nd

I Corinthians 10 v29

Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?

I confess to having struggled with this verse. I don't like rules. I don't like constraints on my freedom. Yet sometimes, as a Christian and especially as a minister of the Church, I do feel constrained. It is my Christian duty to avoid giving offence, but what if, in my opinion, the taking of offence is unjustified? What if I have a perfectly clean conscience about doing something and other people who regard it as offensive are simply being unreasonable? The principles Paul is elucidating here seem to suggest that one should always give in to the prejudices of the *weaker brethren*, but sometimes they are just plain wrong and quite often people's prejudices are quite petty. One might feel that giving into them would only encourage them to continue in their blinkered state, unnecessarily constrain one's own life and perhaps hamper the Church's mission to the more broad-minded. On the other hand, even the most difficult people are precious individuals for whom Christ died.

December 23rd

I Corinthians 10 vv 30-33

Do all to the glory of God.

That must be the principle which defines all our thoughts, words & deeds.

December 24th (Advent 4 / Christmas Day)

I Corinthians 11 v1

Be ye followers of me, even as I am also of Christ.

Christingles, Carol Services, Christmas service in general bring people into Church. There is the joy of Christmas. People talk about the Christmas Spirit – the Holy Spirit, I hope, not brandy! But Christmas isn't an instant – something to experience before going on to the next thing. You and I follow Jesus. The way we present the Gospel at Christmas ought to inspire others to follow Him too.

O LORD, raise up (we pray thee) thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through the satisfaction of thy Son our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be honour and glory, world without end. *Amen.*

December 25th (Christmas Day)

Hebrews 1 v1

GOD, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son,

I'm departing from I Corinthians for these last days of the year. If we can take time on Christmas Day to pause and think, we shall be filled with a sense of wonder beyond words that God so loved the world.

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin; Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end. *Amen.*

December 26th (St Stephen)

Acts 7 v55

Stephen, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

Stephen was the first martyr. Appointed to *wait at tables*, to sort out the disputes between various factions in the Church about the fairness of the distribution of food to poor widows, he quickly became a great preacher of the Gospel, only to meet with the opposition of powerful people who would contrive his death. It was after he had demonstrated from the Bible story the truth of the Gospel, that his opponents were stirred up to a frenzy of anger that Stephen had this vision of heaven and received the grace to forgive (as Jesus did) his tormentors. Stephen knew where he was going. Perhaps to a lesser extent, but we can all share Stephen's vision. We can know Jesus at the Right Hand of God. We know where we are going when our turn comes.

Grant, O Lord, that, in all our sufferings here upon earth for the testimony of thy truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed; and, being filled with the Holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors by the example of thy first Martyr Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to thee, O blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God to succour all those that suffer for thee, our only Mediator and Advocate. *Amen.*

December 27th (St John)

I John 1 v1

THAT which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life.

John and the other apostles knew Jesus in the flesh. They travelled with Him. They ate with Him. They lodged with Him. They worked with Him. They heard His teaching from His own lips. What a privilege. What if we had been in Galilee and Judaea at that time and had seen and heard Jesus for ourselves? When you think about it, there were many who saw Him and did not believe. And then there are His words to Thomas the Sunday after Easter: *Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed.*

MERCIFUL Lord, we beseech thee to cast thy bright beams of light upon thy Church, that it being enlightened by the doctrine of thy blessed Apostle and Evangelist Saint John may so walk in the light of thy truth, that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

December 28th

Matthew 2 v16

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.

This is a disquieting episode in the Christmas story. It happened a long time ago and a long way away. It is prophesied by Jeremiah six centuries before. It echoes Pharaoh's order to kill all the Hebrew boy babies in Egypt in Moses' time, hundreds of years even before Jeremiah. Being so far away and so long ago, maybe this story has for us an air of unreality. But we have to face up to the fact that children suffer terribly in the world today. We hear so many distressing stories of children neglected or the victims of deliberate cruelty. This is still a sinful world as it was in the time when Jesus was physically present on earth. So what can we do to protect children here and now?

O ALMIGHTY God, who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast ordained strength, and madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths; Mortify and kill all vices in us, and so strengthen us by thy grace, that by the innocency of our lives, and constancy of our faith even unto death, we may glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

December 29th

Revelation 19 vv 1-11

Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.

The month of December began with the season of Advent. Advent is easily lost in the preparations for Christmas, but it ought not to be. Advent is about the coming of Christ and our being ready to meet Him. This means a great deal more than making a Christmas cake and rehearsing the carol service. Jesus comes into the world at Christmas, not that He has ever been very far away. God is love. God is eternal. Jesus is God. The Word becomes flesh. He comes into the heart of every believer, making His dwelling both amongst us and within us. He is *God with us* – Immanuel. As we saw yesterday, this is a wicked world. God is just and God will judge this world. He will judge us and we shall each have to give account for ourselves. Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, reconciles us to God. The Cross of Jesus is the ultimate expression both of the justice of God and the mercy of God. The Book of Revelation is about the triumph of good over evil. The wicked get what they deserve. Those who accept Christ as their Saviour receive their eternal reward.

Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.

These words look forward to the final consummation when all these things come to pass and we use a form of them very often at the Communion service – a foretaste of our fellowship with Christ and His whole Church in Heaven.

December 30th

Revelation 21 vv 1-14

We very often read the first seven verses of this chapter at funeral services. They beautifully describe, insofar as human words can describe such things, the blessings which await Christians in heaven. But the

next couple of verses are also Holy Scripture. They too are the Word of God – the warnings as well as the words of comfort. Hopefully, they don't apply to the people who seek a Christian funeral. If our faith is in Jesus, if we repent of our sins, our sins are forgiven and we have eternal life. But our redemption isn't without value; it is priceless. There is justice. Human wickedness has its consequences. The Pharaohs and Herods of this world will face judgment as will we all. Christ's Death is *a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world*, but we do have to accept His grace if we are to be saved.

December 31st (Christmas 1)

Revelation 21 v15 – 22 5

I'm afraid I'm not really a fan of New Year's Eve celebrations. They go on way past my bedtime. I don't like being expected to sing a song nobody seems to know the words to and, worse still, to dance to it without any clear idea of the steps. And as for kissing all and sundry!!!

That's perhaps just me. A lot of people really enjoy New Year's Eve celebrations. Look back with gratitude on the last year. Remember those auld acquaintances. Resolve perhaps to do better in the future than you've done in the past. Celebrate the possibilities which the future presents us with.

But what of the future? How hopeful are you? Are you confident for the future or are you worried? If we're Christians, we've no need to worry. Our lives are in God's Hands. We can take all our worries to Him in prayer. *We know not what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future.* God is with us in our every day lives. Jesus is Immanuel. And, when our life on this planet is over, there is the world to come described in today's reading.

Happy New Year.

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin; Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, one God, world without end. *Amen.*