

The Gospel
according to
St
Matthew

Bible Notes

October - December 2024

1st October

Matthew 23 v13

It saddens me to write this but I cannot see any way to avoid this quarter's bible notes being the last I shall write as Rector of Cuxton & Halling. If there is sufficient interest, I shall consider continuing to issue these notes in a private capacity, but on the 30th November I shall be 70 years old – the age at which clergy are supposed to retire, unless the bishop allows them an extension, which he does not seem to be prepared to do in my case.

We ended the last quarter thinking about ministry: priesthood, preaching, teaching, law, example. We were reminded that all Christians are members of a royal priesthood. There is one high priest - Jesus Christ our Lord – and we may all approach the Throne of Grace through faith in Him. There is no other mediator or advocate available. There is no other mediator or advocate necessary. Anyone and everyone has access to God the Father through Jesus. He is our high priest, our teacher, the One Who fulfils the Law, our example. In Him all believers have received the gift of the Holy Spirit to support us, to guide us, to bring us home to God.

Nevertheless, within the priesthood of all believers, God does appoint ministers: priests, presbyters or elders, preachers, teachers, evangelists, pastors, etc..It is a tremendous responsibility. As we see in this verse, religious leaders who get it wrong not only exclude themselves from the Kingdom of Heaven, but also put off others who may have been sincerely seeking the Way. Think about the ways in which religious leaders may put people off coming to the knowledge of Christ and pray for them and for all Christians that this might not be so.

A Prayer for the Clergy and People.

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.*

October 2nd

Matthew 24 v14

Travelling around the countryside, you often come across beautiful mediaeval churches. The architecture is stunning. The workmanship is outstanding. There is often a holy, peaceful ambience which turns our minds to thoughts of God and to prayer. But do you consider the fact that, at the time the village was investing vast resources in a stone building, the majority of people were probably very poor - living stones in Christ's Temple, St Peter calls Christians, and many of them were cold and hungry when the Church and the landowners and the merchant classes were prioritising the building of a temple made with human hands as a house for God Whom heaven and earth cannot contain. What do you think? I'm not sure what I think. These buildings have obviously been a powerful witness to the Christian faith for hundreds of years and still are, but might not feeding the hungry and clothing the naked have been a more effective witness still to the Truth of the Gospel?

When Judas complained that it was a waste of a great deal of money when a woman anointed the feet of Jesus with very valuable ointment, money which could have been given to the poor, Jesus reminded the apostles that the poor are always with us and that we can do good to them at any time. Maybe, if are sufficiently generous with our time and money, we shall find that we have the resources both for extravagant gestures and for the day to day care of those most in need.

October 3rd

Matthew 23 v15

There have been, and no doubt still are, methods of evangelism which are unworthy of the One to Whom we are called to bear witness. Christian domestic servants would secretly have the children of the Jewish parents they worked for baptised. Hungry people in China were offered rice in exchange for professing Christianity. A prefabricated church building for slaves was sent to an island and the slaves were required on Sundays, their one day off, to carry the stones from the harbour to the top of the hill and assemble them into a place of worship. It's not about numbers. It's not about glorifying missionaries, evangelists, vicars or bishops. It's about glorifying God by acting as conduits of His love to all the people whom we meet.

October 4th

Matthew 23 vv 16-22

Jesus sets a very high standard. *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.* God instructs His people to be holy because He is holy. Our goal is to be made like Him. A daunting idea. But, what if we can think up some get out clauses? It wasn't really stealing because I need that loaf more than Tesco's does. It's not really lying; it's just that I didn't tell the whole truth. It wasn't really adultery; how could you use such an ugly word for our love? It would be unreasonable to expect me to lose my job because I refused to compromise my principles. (Didn't Elisha pass over Naaman's request to be allowed to bow to Rimmon without comment? (II Kings 5¹⁸.) But this wriggling and squirming isn't good enough. We know the commandments. We know that all our conduct should be based on perfect love. Don't look for excuses or get out clauses when it's hard to obey what you know is God's Law. Repent of your sins and pray for grace to do better.

October 5th

Matthew 23 v23

Demob happy, I suppose I can criticise my own Church, so long as I don't forget that I am judged by the same measure as I judge other people. It seems to me that there are some people in the Church of England – some in high positions – who do not *earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints*. They don't believe the doctrines expounded in the Creeds in any straightforward sense. They judge the Bible instead of permitting the Bible to judge them. They are quite relaxed about disregarding or even supplanting beliefs about God, humanity and how we ought to behave which have been cherished and upheld by the people of God for centuries and millennia. But rules about tombstones, faculties, etc. are rigidly enforced. Things that don't matter much or at all are endlessly debated and uncompromisingly insisted upon, while matters of faith and order which are of primary importance are treated as a matter of personal taste.

But how do you and I measure up? I know I sometimes get in a right state and make a huge fuss about things that don't really matter much even in the Church and what really does matter – our love for one another in the service of God – suffers accordingly.

October 6th (Trinity 19)

Matthew 23 vv 24-26

They say that cleanliness is next to godliness, but what if you could only have one or the other? Would you rather have access to soap and water or an opportunity to meet with other Christians, for prayer, bible study & the breaking of bread? Occasionally, I have been offered a cup of tea in houses where the host is unaware or indifferent to the fact that the crockery is less than pristine? Does one risk giving offence by declining to drink the tea or does one drink it and hope for the best? Which matters more, to perform the ritual correctly or to worship in spirit & in truth? These scribes & Pharisees have made a lot of the ritual, what appears on the surface, impressing other people, their own self image, but have missed the point of true religion which is *to visit the widows & the fatherless in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.*

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 7th

Matthew 23 vv 27&28

There are some magnificent tombs about – the pyramids, the Taj Mahal, and, on a smaller scale, in our cemeteries and churches. Inscriptions may be plain, sentimental, grandiloquent or even jokey. There may be statues, angels, open bibles, hearts or representations of the deceased (which last three are not allowed in churchyards) or, I would have thought most appropriate for Christian burials, crosses – which again are for some strange reason discouraged in churchyards. Some older tombs have representations of skulls and other bones as a reminder of what is inside the graves and of what will happen to all of us, no matter how high and mighty our lives on earth. People who do not have God's Holy Spirit within them are like these tombs. They may look amazing on the outside, but inside there is death & decay. On the other hand, if Christ's Holy Spirit dwells in us, we have eternal life and that fact transforms us from within.

An Incumbent should not readily exercise his discretion to consent to a cross, the supreme Christian symbol, for crosses have been too freely used in burial grounds in the past. That's what the guidance says, but I don't understand why. We don't earn our eternal life. It is God's free gift to us undeserving sinners through Christ's death on the cross. The cross is freely available to all and I should not like to think of it being reserved for especially respected Christians.

October 8th

Matthew 23vv 29-31

We've heard a lot lately about toppling statues and removing monuments commemorating long dead sinners who profited from the evil Transatlantic slave trade or the more oppressive aspects of imperialism and colonialism. Is it falsifying history if we expunge these memorials? Better perhaps to leave them *in situ*, but to provide explanatory notes. But where do you stop? We are all sinners except Jesus and some people would argue that representations of Him are in breach of the Second Commandment against making images of God. I've cheekily asked whether the archbishops who want to remove statues of C18 slave traders would also be prepared to banish from their cathedrals images of those Norman bishops & knights who oppressed my Saxon & Danish ancestors? Wouldn't it be more useful if we examined our own lives and repented of our own sins rather than affecting righteous anger at the sins of the long dead? There is a lot of satisfaction to be had in toppling a statue, feeling self-righteous and annoying the authorities. But how about asking ourselves about the conditions in which the people who produce our cheap clothing and the chips which power our phones and computers are working?

October 9th

Matthew 23 vv 34-39

People who proclaim the truth very often provoke opposition & persecution. Notably virtuous people are an irritant. They make the rest of us feel bad about ourselves. Good people are not always good company. People with integrity represent a threat to those whose wealth and power are based on their willingness to go against the moral law. Cain was jealous of Abel. Zacharias made a stand against idolatry. Faithful prophets and preachers are liable to rejection, torture & martyrdom. Jesus takes on Himself the sins of the whole world. Those who crucified Jesus participate in all of human sin, as we all do in fact. Jesus would have died for me if I had been the only sinner. These sinners who crucify Jesus bring a terrible judgment on themselves as all we sinners do. He died for your sin & mine. But how much He longs for us to return to Him & in Him to find our peace. *For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.* All human beings participate in Adam's sin. Redemption in Christ is freely given to all who turn to Him.

October 10th

Matthew 24 vv 1&2

Visiting castles, cathedrals, stately homes, ancient monuments, the Post Office Tower, skyscraper office buildings in the city & at Canary Wharf is a popular pastime. Such works of man are very impressive. Some have stood the test of time for hundreds of years. Others represent the latest capabilities of modern technology. We are rightly impressed, but we ought not to think that they are forever, that human craft & ingenuity have finally conquered the forces of disorder and that we have no need of God. Remember the Tower of Babel.

1 All my hope on God is
founded;
he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and
chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.
2 Human pride and earthly
glory,
sword and crown betray his
trust;
what with care and toil he
buildeth,
tower and temple, fall to
dust.
But God's power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.
3 God's great goodness aye
endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing
thought:
splendour, light, and life
attend him,
beauty springeth out of

naught.
Evermore
from his store
new-born worlds rise and
adore.
4 Daily doth th' Almighty
giver
bounteous gifts on us
bestow;
his desire our soul
delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we
go.
Love doth stand
at his hand;
joy doth wait on his
command.
5 Still from earth to God
eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises
praising
for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all:
ye who follow shall not fall.

October 11th

Matthew 24 v3

When will the end come? We'd all like to know that. How will the world end? What will happen to us? Will it be climate change, nuclear war, or a global pandemic which finishes off the human race, or an asteroid strike or solar flares? There are plenty of things to worry about in the more sensationalist scientific literature if worrying is your thing. There are obviously precautions which we can and ought to take against some of these possible eventualities. What we do know, however, is that Jesus will be there at the end, as He was at the beginning. We don't have to be afraid even in the Day of Judgment. All we have to do is to trust.

October 12th

Matthew 24 vv 4&5

Whatever cataclysms may or may not happen to the earth, the ultimate end will be the dissolution of heaven and earth. There will be no more time or space as we know them. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. Christ will come in glory. Every eye shall see Him. There will no doubt about the Second Coming! We shall all be judged, quick & dead. There would be no hope for us if we depended on our own merits in order to be saved. But Jesus is *a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world*. He is our sure & certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.

October 13th (Trinity 20)

Matthew 24 vv 6-8

I think many of us have thought lately - what with CoViD, natural disasters, poverty at home & abroad, and news of wars breaking out all over the world, plus political chaos even in what we think of as stable democracies – that we could be in the end times. Jesus warns us not to jump to conclusions. God's purposes are unfolding in His good time. *See that ye be not troubled*. Trust in Him. He is the One Who knows what we need before we even ask Him. Trust Him, and, by His grace, keep His commandments. *Love one another*.

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 14th

Matthew 24 vv 9&10

We've never known real persecution. We might have been argued with or laughed at for our faith, but I doubt if any of us has ever faced worse than that. That is unpleasant enough and can be sufficient to make us keep quiet about who we are and what we believe. We've read about the persecution of Christians and other people for their beliefs. Worst of all, we've read about Christians torturing and murdering their fellow Christians as a result of their different interpretations of the Truth. Considering that the Truth is the Prince of Peace, this would be unbelievable if we did not know that it does happen. It is nice to think that one wouldn't be afraid, that one would stick to one's principles whatever they did to one, that one would die calmly praying for one's tormentors and confidently stepping into the future with Jesus. I am impressed by how brave people can be in the face of pain, disability and the threat of pain. How brave I would be I don't know. One would have to pray for grace to bear whatever befell. It is not too difficult to imagine that some would betray their friends and even their families in order to escape themselves. It also happens that some people will betray family members to the authorities, because they have converted from their family religion to another faith – eg Muslims becoming Christians in countries like Iran. Don't forget that Christians are still persecuted in the world today. You might be able to do something for them like write to them or apply a bit of political pressure. Pray for the persecuted. Pray for the persecutors.

October 15th

Matthew 24 v11

How do you recognise a false prophet? The Church today is riven with different opinions about important issues. People like me tend to cleave to *the faith once delivered to the saints*, to try to base what we believe and how we behave on the Bible and the way in which it has been interpreted in the Church for the best part of 2,000 years. This puts us at odds with contemporary society in a number of key areas. There has always been a tension between Christian values and the reality of how states have been governed and people have lived their down through the ages. This is difficult for an established Church. If we are inflexibly uncompromising we risk alienating the nation and thereby sacrificing our opportunities to do a lot of good. If we are too compromising,

however, we have nothing to offer save the appearance of religion, *having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof*. In recent decades, this has been a particular issue on matters regarding identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. Even in my lifetime, attitudes in society to the respective roles of women and men, divorce, abortion, contraception, living together unmarried, homosexuality, transgender people and gender fluidity have hanged rapidly, generally in a direction away from traditional Christian values. Many people, including many Christians, believe that traditional beliefs on these issues are no longer acceptable if ever they were – that it is a matter of justice that girls & boys have equal opportunities, that it is wrong to expect people to continue in unhappy or even toxic marriages, that women have the right to control their own fertility, that there’s nothing much wrong with premarital sex, and that it is cruel to try to prevent homosexual people, trans people and others living out their own identities and finding love with whomsoever they choose. Love, it is believed, means affirming and supporting people, not condemning them and setting up obstacles in their way. Radical Christians interpret these changes as the work of the Holy Spirit.

Traditionalists, however, worry that these changing attitudes, well meant as they are, ultimately undermine the family and our society which is based on the care families give to one another and to others in the community.

How do you recognise a false prophet? *By their fruits shall ye know them*. What tends to love? What does the Bible say? What can we learn from Christian Tradition? What does reason tell us? Pray. Debate. But do not cease to love one another, no matter how much we may disagree. The prophecies of a false prophet don’t come to pass. The Spirit will lead us into all Truth, but we do need to be patient.

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

October 16th

Matthew 24 v12

The love of many shall wax cold.

What happened to Christian England? Why do so few people go to church these days? How is it that we have failed to communicate our faith to young people? Why are there so few candidates for ordination? And in a country which (despite the problems of the last few years) is still much richer than ever it was before the current century and than most of the world is even today, there is never enough money for Christian work? I think that the problem is that people really don't get what it is to believe in God. It's down to us who do get it to demonstrate to the world why faith matters more than anything.

October 17th

Matthew 24 v13

But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

Whether we confronted by outright opposition & persecution or by sheer indifference, if we endure, we shall be saved. What are the resources for endurance? Membership of a Christian congregation, Holy Baptism & Holy Communion, prayer, the Bible. There are very many ways in which God makes Himself known to us, through which He comes to us and by which He makes us strong, but we ought not to neglect the four listed above if at all possible, because they are the primary means of grace.

October 18th (S Luke)

Matthew 24 v14

Before the coming of the Kingdom of God, the Gospel must be preached to all nations. This is the work of apostles, missionaries and evangelists. It is the shared task of all Christians. Only those who know God have eternal life. If we do not share our faith we are not loving our neighbours as ourselves because we are keeping to ourselves what would be of inestimable benefit to them. We don't try to get people to come to Church just because we'd like bigger congregations to help keep things going. It is to the glory of God & for the benefit of our hearers that we tell people about Jesus.

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

Matthew 24 vv 15-21

This chapter covers three things: the final end of the world, the quashing of the Jewish Revolt by the Romans and the destruction of the Temple in AD70, and (I think we can say) every apocalyptic event, every threat of annihilation, between the two.

The abomination of desolation is probably the occupying power setting up pagan worship or placing an image or an idol on the Temple. When the Romans besiege the city, Jesus tells people to flee to safety in the countryside in what will be very dangerous times. The story is that the Christians in Jerusalem did what Jesus said and escaped but that the Jews disregarded His words and were caught up in the horror of the sacking of the Holy City.

The message is not to panic whatever happens. Trust God and do what He tells us to.

October 20th (Trinity 21)

Matthew 24 v22

And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.

The mess the human race has made of the world would deservedly lead to our complete annihilation, But God is merciful. These tribulations – the ruthless crushing of the Jewish Revolt by the Romans, subsequent wars, plagues, famines and natural disaster, that last day, that *day of the Lord which will come like a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein* – God will temper and His elect will live to see *new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness*. We're not told how many will be saved. Neither is it for us to judge others. Neither should we be complacent about ourselves. But we do know that everyone who is saved is saved through Jesus Christ & what He has accomplished on the Cross.

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 21st

Matthew 24 vv 24-28

All sorts of people will set themselves up as leaders or opinion formers. They might claim to be inspired by God. They might even be able to work miracles. *For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.* More plausibly to C21 people, those who set themselves up to rule, lead or influence may be politicians, self-styled intellectuals, the very wealthy or celebrities of one sort or another. There are sects and cults even in the world today whose leaders are acclaimed as great teachers, prophets or even Messiahs. *By their fruits ye shall know them.*

Ultimately, we follow Christ & Him alone. There will be no doubt when He returns to judge the quick and the dead. There is no other sure guide we can follow as we pass our time here on earth. We do need rulers and leaders and teachers. We do need experts. We naturally admire people who have achieved a lot. We need prophets & visionaries. But ultimately, it is only Jesus to Whom it makes sense to offer our unqualified allegiance. All other would be leaders we judge in comparison to Him.

October 22nd

Matthew 24 vv 29-34

1. Lo! he comes, with clouds
descending,
Once for favoured sinners slain!
Thousands, thousand saints, attending,
Swell the triumph of his train:
Hallelujah!
God appears on earth to reign.

2. Every eye shall now behold him,
Robed in dreadful majesty!
Those who set at nought and sold him,
Pierced, and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing,
Shall the true Messiah see!

3. Those dear tokens of his passion
Still his dazzling body bears,
Cause of endless exaltation
To his ransomed worshippers;
With what rapture
Gaze we on those glorious scars.

4. Yea, amen!—let all adore thee,
High on thine eternal throne!
Saviour, take the pow'r and glory;
Claim the kingdom for thine own:!
Oh come quickly—
Alleluia! Come, Lord, come!

October 23rd

Matthew 24 v35

Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. Think about that. How precious is God's Word. It is by His Word that He created heaven & earth. When His Word is proclaimed by a prophet or by anyone else come to that, it effects what it signifies. What God says happens. God's deeds are not merely as good as His Word. God's deeds are effected through His Word. When God speaks His purposes are accomplished. God's Word does not return to Him void. *The word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.* The Bible is God's Word. *The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.*

October 24th

Matthew 24 vv 36-51

Till your land as if you would till it forever; live your life as though you would die today. That motto doesn't come from the Bible, but you can see the wisdom of it. That we all have responsibilities in this life is an aspect of our duty to God, that we discharge them to the best of our ability – which includes leaving things in good order for those who will come after us. On the other hand, we could be called home at any moment. Maybe the End will come in our lifetime. If it doesn't, we shall surely die and we don't know either the date of the End of the world or the day of our own death. We might be summoned to stand before the Judgment Seat of God at any time.

Psalms 90 and I Corinthians 15^{20ff} are both used in the BCP Burial Service. Ps 90 is a meditation on the need for wisdom in the light of God's eternity and our mortality. I Corinthians 15 is about how we put on in immortality through faith in Christ Who *died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.* Both passages finish with a verse about what it means for this life to look at it in the light of eternity.

Shew thy servants thy work: and their children thy glory. And the glorious Majesty of the Lord our God be upon us: prosper thou the work of our hands upon us, O prosper thou our handy-work.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

October 25th

Matthew 25 vv 1-13

It is wise to be ready. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.* The wise person is the one who walks in the Law of God. The Law is summarised in the commandment to love. So, if we want to be ready for the Bridegroom and join Him in the wedding feast, our calling is, by the grace of God, to be people of love.

October 26th

Matthew 25 vv 14-30

St Paul teaches us that *we are the body of Christ and members in particular.* Our human bodies are made up of different limbs, tissues and organs. Each has its function, with a few exceptions such as the appendix. It is the same with the Church. The Church is the Body of Christ. We are the Church's limbs, tissues and organs. It is by the grace of God that we are what we are. Our skills, our opportunities, our resources are all God's gifts to us. He has entrusted us with our abilities. We are happiest when we are using our God given skills and opportunities, our wealth and our possessions to do those good works He has prepared for each one of us to perform. Originally, a talent was a weight of silver or gold which represented a large sum of money. Via this parable, I should think, the word *talent* has attained its modern meaning – something we are good at. We each have our part & God has given us the skills and opportunities to play that part. There are no appendices in the Church! We all have a part to play & the Church is that much less effective if opt out. The parable indicates that there are consequences if we make the most of our talents and if we don't. I'm very fond of this post-Communion Prayer from the BCP.

ALMIGHTY and everliving God, we most heartily thank thee, for that thou dost vouchsafe to feed us, who have duly received these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ; and dost assure us thereby of thy favour and goodness towards us; and that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom, by the merits of the most precious death and passion of thy dear Son. And we most humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. *Amen.*

October 27th (Trinity 22)

Matthew 25 vv 31-46

When I was at Orpington, there was a regular meeting for older people in the church hall. They held an annual service and this was the bible reading they always chose. It was hard to say something fresh about it each year! The meaning is obvious. The point, however, is this. If we understand that what we do or don't do to other people is the same as doing it or not doing it to Jesus, how do we account for our indifference or even hostility to other people?

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.*

October 28th (S Simon & S Jude)

Matthew 26 vv 1-5

Simon & Jude are two of the lesser known apostles – not Simon Peter or Judas Iscariot. They were apostles nevertheless and would have been in Jerusalem with Jesus at this Passover time when the authorities were plotting against Him. I wonder what they were thinking. Possibly they thought that Jesus would be crowned King in succession to His father David, chuck out the Romans and reign in Jerusalem. They knew that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, but what did they understand by the Kingdom of Heaven – presumably God intervening decisively in human history, but in what way? Very likely they were afraid. Or perhaps stoic like Thomas, who said *Let us also go, that we might die with him.* A couple of days after today's reading, they would scatter when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane. They would experience the horror and grief of the Crucifixion. And then they would be witnesses of the Resurrection, recipients of the Holy Spirit, apostles sent out to proclaim the Word throughout the world, foundation stones of the Church. For all their human weakness they remained faithful to Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, performed greater works than His, as should we!

O 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

Matthew 26 vv 6-13

It is better to give than to receive.

Giving is an act of love, especially when it anticipates no reward. In fact love is self-giving. It is therefore also an act of love to receive a gift graciously, even if it is unexpected and some might think inappropriate. Jesus accepts this woman's love. It bears witness to His death & burial, His giving of Himself. This woman's devotion for Jesus will be remembered wherever people believe in Him. It is therefore mean-spirited of the apostles to grumble that it would have been better to sell the ointment and give the proceeds to the poor. Judas was the chief grumbler, he kept the money & the suggestion is that he would have helped himself to some of this money. But we do always have the poor with us. We can at any time give to individuals or to missions or charities. Most of us can afford both to be generous to the poor as part of our daily routine and, on occasion, to make extravagant gestures.

October 30th

Matthew 26 vv 14-16

It would appear that this business with the precious ointment is what decides Judas to betray Jesus? What was his motive? Surely it was more than losing the opportunity to purloin from the poor box. Some people think that Judas became disillusioned, that he had expected a more militant leader than Jesus, someone who would kick out the Romans, or maybe he expected the Day of the LORD, God's decisive intervention in history to occur at any minute. Instead of that, the One Whom he had believed to be the Messiah had upset all the important people & was obviously on the road to an ignominious death, possibly taking His followers with Him. We're not told why Judas betrayed Jesus. Jesus said, "The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born." Judas, Judas' free choice, was an essential part of God's plan for our salvation, as was Mary's. She freely chose to be the Mother of the Son of God. Without her making the right choice, Jesus would not have been born to set us free. Without Judas' wrong choice He would not have died for our salvation. This is the mystery. We have freedom of choice. We are answerable for the choices we make. Yet God's purpose works out ineluctably. The end is foreseen at the beginning.

October 31st

Matthew 26 vv 17-25

It is commonly lamented that families no longer eat together. They come in at different times and eat when they are hungry. When they do all sit down at the same table, their attention is on their screens. It is often suggested that this failure to eat together helps to account for our losing our sense of belonging. We are members one of another and sharing food is one expression of our connectedness. We share ideas as well as food. We learn how to behave in company. We are surrounded by people who care for us and whom we respect. Not all family tables are happy. *Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.* It would be impractical in many households to eat together, but we do miss out if we don't.

To betray someone with whom you have broken bread is a terrible thing – a point to remember when we come to Holy Communion.

November 1st (All Saints)

Matthew 26 vv 26-30

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.*

Holy Communion is our fellowship meal. We are nourished by the Bread of Life. We dwell in Him & He in us. We remember all that He has done for us. We experience His Presence with us. We acknowledge our unworthiness & receive His assurance that we are accepted in the Beloved and that this life which we enjoy on earth is but a foretaste of what is to come. We are in fellowship with those with whom we share this Eucharist (Thanksgiving) in the same building, with all Christians on earth and all Christians in heaven. This is why we must partake only when we are in love and charity with our neighbours and why it is dangerous to share in the Holy Communion not recognising the Presence of Jesus among us and in all His people, not discerning His Body in the Sacrament & the fellowship.

WE do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are

not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. *Amen.*

2nd November (All Souls)

Matthew 26 vv 31-35

Jesus is our Shepherd. Without Jesus, human beings are like sheep without a shepherd – lost, wandering seeking sustenance, without anyone to care from their most real needs, in peril. We have a Gospel to proclaim – to bring home Christ’s sheep who are not (yet) of this fold. Without Him, we too may scatter, but He never stops seeking us to bring us home. Because He is risen – all those who live in Him, by faith in Him (however tenuous that faith) will rise with Him. So will all those who die in the Lord, as we remember in the commemoration of All Souls. It’s no use boasting that we’d always stand firm. We’re all fallible human beings, but He never lets us down.

The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is his new creation
By water and the Word.
From heaven he came and
sought her
To be his holy bride;
With his own blood he bought
her,
And for her life he died.
Elect from every nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth;
Her charter of salvation,
One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses,
With every grace endued.
Though with a scornful wonder
We see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed,

Yet saints their watch are
keeping;
Their cry goes up,
"How long?"
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song.
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.

3rd November (Trinity 23)

Matthew 26 vv 36-46

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.*

Jesus (like Jacob in Genesis 32 vv 22-32) wrestled with God in prayer. God is our refuge and strength. Sometimes it may seem that He is distant or that the demands of us is more than we can bear. The disciples ought to have been praying, but were overcome with tiredness. Like Jacob, Jesus clung on to God for a blessing. His faith endured His horror at what was to come. *Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.* He will pass through the valley of the shadow of death. He will dwell in the House of the Lord for ever. His invitation to humanity is to follow Him in the Way of the Cross which leads to glory.

4th November

Matthew 26 vv 47-50

Betrayal is a terrible thing – betrayal of family, friends, country, God. Loyalty binds us together, mutual respect, brotherly love. It is important that we can trust one another. How could we even survive if we were not confident that there are at least some people whom we can trust, who will be there for us, no matter what? We can trust God absolutely. As God's children, we should be like Him. People ought to be able to trust us – to treat them fairly, to look after them when necessary, not ever to let them down, no matter what happens, no matter how they behave. Maybe the least trustworthy in society most need people whom they can trust always to be there for them. That doesn't mean allowing people to abuse our trust. It doesn't do anyone any good to be allowed to get away with cheating. It does mean, however, never giving up on people. God never gives up on us.

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

1 When we walk with the Lord
in the light of his word,
what a glory he sheds on our
way!
While we do his good will,
he abides with us still,

and with all who will trust and
obey.
Refrain:
Trust and obey, for there's no
other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to
trust and obey.

5th November

Matthew 26 v51

And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear.

The servant's name was Malchus and Jesus healed his ear. In my last parish we had a big youth club including many children whose parents seldom or never came to church. It was in the days when children were still allowed out without supervision. This gave us an opportunity to get to know the children and gave them the opportunity to feel at home in church. We were able to tell them the stories of Jesus. One year, the youth club put on a passion play. One of the boys was given the part of Malchus, which he obviously enjoyed. Later on, he brought himself to one of our Holy Week services and I always remember the way he looked at me and grinned when I got to the bit about Malchus in the Gospel reading. That boy would be around 50 now and I wonder if he still has the faith he had when he was a child? I hope he has. He certainly wouldn't if nobody had ever told him about Jesus. *How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!* How do we reach children with the Gospel now? We know that the old ways no longer work or have become impractical now. What can we do today & tomorrow to teach children the truth about Jesus?

6th November

Matthew 26 v52

All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.

I was in conversation once with a clergyman who had had to take the funeral of a gangster shot dead by a rival. This might have furnished a suitable text if my friend had dared. Violence begets violence. Nothing is ever finally solved by violence. There might be a temporary peace if your enemies are dead, crushed or too frightened of you to do anything but what you want them to do. But it's not true peace (in the sense of the Peace of God which passeth all understanding) and it won't last. Your enemies will seek revenge, attempt to throw off the yoke, whatever it takes to start another war. Truer peace, endless peace can only be achieved by the means that Jesus Himself adopted – the total surrender of oneself in love.

November 7th

Matthew 26 vv 53&54

Christians are often uncomfortable with the Old Testament. There is a great deal of unpleasantness in it! But there is a great deal of unpleasantness in the world. The OT is realistic, shedding light on the hard questions which arise from our human relationship with God & our relationships with one another. There are many perspectives in the OT, many different ways of coming to the Truth, which can only be fully manifest in Christ and, even *now we see through a glass darkly*. We shall only see *face to face* and *know as we are known* in the resurrection to eternal life. Jesus fulfils the Law and the Prophets (the OT). *Search the (OT) scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me*, says Jesus. We need the Old Testament as well as the New if we are truly to appreciate Jesus.

November 8h

Matthew 26 vv 55&56

Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? Most decent people would find it humiliating to be arrested, even if they weren't guilty of anything. If a policeman in uniform comes to your door, you might wonder whether there has been an accident or whether there has been a complaint against you or simply what will the neighbours think. Some people even plead guilty to things they haven't done to get it all over with – the police, the formality of the courts, the expense of legal action. It is, however, as much a lie to plead guilty if you are innocent as it is to plead not guilty when you have broken the law. But what about cases like Andrew Malkinson? He was convicted of a rape he had not committed. He maintained his innocence. He would probably have received a lighter sentence if he had pleaded guilty and been let out of prison years earlier. But he maintained his integrity and suffered for it. Might he have thought that, given that the police had been ineffective, inefficient and possibly corrupt, he was entitled to tell a lie & confess to a crime he had not committed in order to gain his freedom sooner? So, you wouldn't plead guilty to a murder or a rape you hadn't committed just to get it all over, but what about a minor motoring offence or shop lifting or drunk and disorderly? Would it be worth fighting the system, incurring legal fees, etc., when you are fairly certain that the magistrates will believe the police or council officer? I hope I would maintain my integrity, but it would be very hard to resist temptation if the punishment for what I hadn't done was less painful than the effort to defend myself.

November 9th

Matthew 26 vv 57-60

Presumably, they came *out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take Him*, because they were afraid of the crowds (whom the authorities would have regarded as the mob) if they tried to arrest Him when He *sat daily with them teaching in the temple*. The sequence of events around our Lord's trial and condemnation is quite difficult to follow. It would appear that there were more formal hearings and also more informal examinations of Jesus. The Sanhedrin, the council, was not allowed to meet at night. So this was not a proper trial. His enemies, however, were anxious to gain evidence against Him and effectively to secure a guilty verdict even before the proper proceedings could begin. It's not unknown even today for issues to be "settled" behind closed doors before the formal public meeting of the council or synod or public inquiry and perhaps even, on occasion, court hearing. When the police or Crown Prosecution Service think they have got their man, they may sit on any evidence which might exculpate him, as in the case of Andrew Malkinson.

November 10th (Trinity 24)

Matthew 26 vv 61&62

We're more confident of the accuracy of testimony when there is more than one witness, a good biblical principle. We have to be a bit more subtle than that, however. Truthful people who have witnessed the same event may well give different accounts. Indeed, if two or more witnesses give exactly the same testimony, possibly in the same words, we ought to be suspicious that they are colluding in a lie. It has been suggested that the differences between the four gospel accounts of the Resurrection strengthen their testimony. They are obviously independent. They have not colluded in a fable. Each, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, has given what was for him the best possible account of an event which is beyond human understanding. In the case of this travesty of a trial, however, the "witnesses" are so far off beam that they do not even appear to agree. Actually, Jesus did say, *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*. (John 2¹⁹). He meant the temple of His Body, the dwelling place of God, not the temple made with human hands which obviously cannot contain Him Whom heaven and earth cannot contain.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold
Him
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee
away
When He comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable-place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty,
Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, whom
cherubim
Worship night and day,
A breastful of milk
And a mangerful of hay;
Enough for Him, whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.

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 11th

Matthew 26 vv 63-66

So, Who really is Jesus. Now He tells them. He the Son of God, *God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds*, and the Son of Man, *of the substance of his Mother, born in the world*. And He died for me.

November 12th

Matthew 26 vv 67&68

Then did they spit in his face and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands.

Gratuitous violence, unnecessary insults. Presumably, these people thought that Jesus was guilty as charged of a very serious offence and that He deserved His punishment. But, even so, why add to His sufferings? Had they no compassion for a man who was about to suffer a terrible death? Did they hate Him so much? Did it give them some sort of kick to hurt a man just because they could? Was it their own personal feeling of inadequacy that led them to mistreat someone who was helpless and in their power? *God desireth not the death of a sinner*, and neither should we. Jesus was innocent, the only totally innocent human being ever. Some people do commit horrible crimes and it is necessary in the interests of justice to punish them severely. But, even so, God doesn't stop loving them. Neither should we. Justice isn't revenge. We, who by the grace of God, are not criminals ought not to get any pleasure from seeing others punished. The hope is redemption.

November 13th

Matthew 26 vv 69-75

What would it take you to deny Jesus? The possibility of being arrested & crucified with Him? Or would the embarrassment of admitting your faith to your friends be sufficient?

November 14th

Matthew 27 vv 1-10

All the disciples ran away in Gethsemane. Peter denied Christ three times. We know how Peter was restored to friendship with Jesus (John 21). All the other apostles evidently became witnesses of His Resurrection and leaders of the Church. Could Judas have come back from the terrible the thing which he had done? I'm sure he could have. *The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.* So why didn't he confess his sins to God, receive forgiveness and rejoin the apostolic band? Couldn't he believe in the forgiveness of God? Did he believe that the other apostles & disciples would never take him back? Was he so consumed by guilt that, even knowing Jesus as he did, he could not believe that Jesus could still love him? I'm sure that even Judas could be forgiven. I'm sure that any & every sinner can be forgiven. Can we accept God's gift of forgiveness for our own sins – however vile they may be? Can we help other people to know that God will forgive them if they return to Him no matter what they have done. Sometimes, it is good if a minister of religion pronounces God's absolution of sinners. God has given this authority to His Church to pronounce the forgiveness of sins to all who truly repent & unfeignedly believe His holy Gospel. Nobody must confess his sins before a priest. All may. Some should. It is always God Who forgives but His ministers are charged to help us sinners know that.

November 15th

Matthew 27 vv 11-14

What does *King of the Jews* mean? Do you know? Neither did Pilate. Jesus could not deny that He is the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel, the King of Kings & Lord of Lords because He is. But Pilate would misunderstand any of these titles. He couldn't argue for His innocence because the charges were made up. He couldn't plead for mercy. For this hour He had come.

Isaiah 53: ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his

mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. ⁸ He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. ⁹ And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

November 16th

Matthew 27 vv 15-23

Barabbas was a terrorist, we should say. The name Barabbas means *son of the father*. The true Son of the Father is Jesus. Adam is described as the son of God. All human beings are made to be the children of God. But, *all we like sheep have gone astray*. We have taken our inheritance, the good gifts God bestows upon us, and, like the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, have wasted them, with the result that we are helpless and alone with no hope until we come to our senses and return to our Father. The Son of God dies in the place of Barabbas, son of the father, and of all the Father's errant children, so that, through faith in Him, we may be adopted back into the Family of God and receive the Spirit by Whom we cry, Abba, Father.

¹⁰ Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. ¹¹ He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

November 17th (Collect Epiphany 5)

Matthew 27 vv 24&25

O LORD, we beseech thee to keep thy Church and household continually in thy true religion; that they who do lean only upon the hope of thy heavenly grace may evermore be defended by thy mighty power; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

(When there are two few "provers" for Sundays after Trinity, we use those we didn't use after Epiphany).

Some churches omit v25 when they read this Gospel. It has been misused down the ages by wicked Christians as a pretext for persecuting the Jews. I cannot agree to edit the Bible. God *caused all Scripture to be written for our learning*. What Scripture teaches is that we all bear responsibility for the Crucifixion, that judgment is reserved to God & the persecution of others is always a sin.

November 18th

Matthew 27 vv 26-31

A Roman scourging was sufficient in itself to kill some of those who suffered it.

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

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

I cannot tell how He could love
a child so weak and full of sin;
His love must be most
wonderful
if He could die my love to win.

I sometimes think about the
cross,
and shut my eyes, and try to
see

the cruel nails and crown of
thorns,
and Jesus crucified for me.

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

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

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

November 19th

Matthew 27 v32

Sometimes we organise outdoor processions to tell this story. Often we ask one of the me to carry a large cross. Such a cross is heavy and the expectation is that the burden will be relieved by passing it on to someone else as the cross gets too heavy for the earlier bearers. In my experience, the men carrying the cross are often quietly reluctant to give it up. It means something to bear the cross, if only in a procession or pageant even. We're all called to take the cross figuratively and to bear it lifelong.

Take up thy cross, the Saviour said,
If thou wouldest my disciple be;
Deny thyself, the world forsake,
And humbly follow after me.

November 20th

Matthew 27 vv 33-38

These events are prophesied in the psalms written hundreds of years before they took place – Psalms 69 & 22. When I was a medical student, I tried to persuade a Jewish atheist of the truth of the Christian Gospel because Christ is both foretold by and the fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures which God bestowed on Israel over the centuries leading up to the Birth of the Messiah. He wasn't convinced then. I don't know if he ever came to know God & Jesus Christ Whom He has sent. I hope he did. If so, I may have played a small part in God's plan for that young man's life. It is, however, God Who reveals Himself to people. They are not convinced either by the strength of our arguments or even by the goodness of our lives, though both can play apart, especially the latter. If we desire that people should come to know God, we must pray for them first.

November 21st

Matthew 27 vv 39-45

The Temple of His Body will rise in three days. He could come down from the Cross, but this was the hour for which He came into the world. The Truth of God is fully manifested, not in a remarkable miracle, but in our Lord's supreme sacrifice of Himself in love. God could have delivered Him. but genuine faith, such as Jesus had, still believes even when the believer feels forsaken. We know objectively that the Judge of all the earth does right, even when we don't know it subjectively. The intellect of the person of faith sometimes knows what the heart cannot believe and sometimes *vice versa*. Only Luke tells us that one of the thieves repented and received that blessing which all penitent sinners are promised: *You shall be with me in paradise.*

November 22nd

Matthew 27 vv 45-49

My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?

For centuries, Christians have wondered about these words. How could Jesus feel forsaken by God? Could Jesus actually be forsaken by God? Isn't it marvellous that He was tempted in every respect as we are? Jesus endured the worst that could happen to any human being. Jesus is therefore with us, He understands and sympathises with us in our deepest trouble, in every weakness. If you read Psalm 22 right through from this first verse through all the prophesied torments that Jesus would undergo, that you & I could

undergo, the last eleven verses are an affirmation of faith in God and His Providence.

November 23rd

Matthew 27 vv 50-54

The Crucifixion of Jesus is the turning point of history, the fulcrum on which the universe pivots, the single event which transforms our lives & our prospects..

And can it be that I should gain
An int'rest in the Saviour's
blood?

Died He for me, who caused
His pain?

For me, who Him to death
pursued?

Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, should die
for me?

'Tis mystery all! Th'Immortal
dies!

Who can explore His strange
design?

In vain the firstborn seraph
tries

To sound the depths of love
divine!

'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no
more.

He left His Father's throne
above,
So free, so infinite His grace;
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless

race;
'Tis mercy all, immense and
free;
For, O my God, it found out
me.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's
night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning
ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed
with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was
free;
I rose, went forth and followed
Thee.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness
divine,
Bold I approach th'eternal
throne,
And claim the crown, through
Christ my own.

November 24th (Last Sunday after Trinity)

Matthew 27 vv 55&56

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.*

These women must have been very down. The Man they respected, admired & loved, the One upon Whom they'd pinned so many hopes was dead and had died in such a horrible way. What would it mean for God to stir up the wills of those faithful

women? Not I think to take away their grief and confusion. These natural emotions would have sprung from their love. Stirring up their wills would be to enable them to bear up, to survive, to fulfil their calling & at last to be reunited with Jesus.

November 25th

Matthew 27 vv 57-61

What happened regarding the Lord's Burial is believed to be in fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah 53⁹: *And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.* Jesus, the Suffering Servant, was crucified between two thieves. Joseph was an honourable man – a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council and (secretly) a follower of Jesus. He was also a rich man, rich enough to have bought his own tomb in advance. John tells us that Nicodemus also was involved in Christ's Burial – the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night, to whom Jesus uttered these wonderful words: *So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

November 26th

Matthew 27 vv 62-66

Several times in the Gospel long before the Crucifixion Jesus speaks about His dying and rising again. The disciples don't seem to have comprehended what He was talking about. His Death was too awful to contemplate. Resurrection was inconceivable. But the Pharisees must have heard some rumours and weren't taking any chances. *The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light,* says Jesus in Luke 16.

November 28th

Matthew 28 vv 1-10

Our Lord's Resurrection was phenomenal, incomprehensible, astonishing, astounding, amazing. The different Gospels tell this wonderful story which is beyond human understanding in different ways, but they are all agreed that the tomb was empty, that the women were the first witnesses, that He Himself appeared, that His friends were slow to believe and it swiftly becomes clear that the miracle of Christ's Death & Resurrection is the cornerstone of the Gospel, on which all else in Heaven & Earth depend for their relationship with God. St Paul writes in I Corinthians 15^{1ff}: *Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand;*² *By*

which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; ⁴ And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

November 29th

Matthew 28 vv 11-15

There is famous book called *Who Moved the Stone?* by Frank Morison. It examines the evidence from the Bible and concludes that the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the only possible explanation for the events described. Bishop Tom Wright wrote a similar book, but much longer, far more wide-ranging and much more scholarly, which came to the same conclusion. You can't account for the biblical evidence nor for the life and growth of the Church except by acknowledging that Jesus rose from the dead. Wright cites the words attributed by Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle to Sherlock Holmes: "When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." Bishop Wright maintains that every other possible explanation of how the Church came into existence based on faith in Jesus' Resurrection is impossible and that, therefore, however improbable it may seem, Jesus must have risen from the dead. Many people, however, would look at this the other way round. If you believe that resurrection is impossible, then there must be some other explanation, however improbable, for the Church's faith in Christ. The evidence is not compelling unless you are open minded. You can only come to faith if you are open to the possibilities of God.

November 30th (St Andrew)

Matthew 28 vv 16-20

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.*

Andrew has been thought of as the first missionary. When Andrew came to know Jesus, his first thought was to tell his brother Simon (Peter). Andrew was one of those four fishermen whom Jesus called to leave their nets and to become fishers of men. It was Andrew who went with Philip when the latter was approached by some Greeks who said, *We would see Jesus* and told Jesus about them.

We all have a calling to follow Jesus and to keep His commandments. We all have our part to play in bearing witness of the Gospel whatever our particular vocation may be.

December 1st (Advent Sunday)

Romans 13 vv 8-14

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.*

The first day of a New Year! The Lord is coming. Are we ready to receive Him? *Owe no man anything but to love one another: for he that loveth hath fulfilled the law. It is high time to wake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed.* Exciting, isn't it? *Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.*

December 2nd

I Peter 4 vv 7-19

Peter writes to Christian communities facing – no doubt with trepidation – the possibility of persecution. His message is to have faith in God. We are very privileged to be Christians, to know that God loves us. He has made us His own people. We know that it is He Who sustains in our earthly lives and that there is a wonderful inheritance laid up for us in Heaven. We have no reason to be afraid. The response required from us is love – love for God, love for one another, God has given everyone of us the gifts that we need in order to play our particular part in His plans for the Church & the world. Whether we have a humble part or a starring role, we are all part of the production. We must use the gifts which God has given us. *Minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.* When we suffer for our Christian faith, we suffer with Him and He shares our pain. *I have given them thy word; says Jesus, and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.* We commit our souls to our faithful Creator.

December 3rd

I Peter 5 vv 1-14

Christian clergy - bishops, priests & deacons – must model themselves on Christ. Leadership is compatible with humble service. Think & pray about that as you pray for your clergy. All Christian people must model themselves on Christ – humble in the sight Of God, humble in our bearing towards one another. We rely on God. Ultimately, we rely on Him alone. We can resist the devil, powerful as he is, if our faith is in God and we make use of the means of grace God supplies – prayer, Christian fellowship, the Sacraments, God’s Word, etc..

O GOD, merciful Father, that despisest not the sighing of a contrite heart, nor the desire of such as be sorrowful; Mercifully assist our prayers which we make before thee in all our troubles and adversities, whensoever they oppress us; and graciously hear us, that those evils which the craft and subtilty of the devil or man worketh against us be brought to nought; and by the providence of thy goodness they may be dispersed; that we thy servants, being hurt by no persecutions, may evermore give thanks unto thee in thy holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

O Lord, arise, help us, and deliver us for thy Name's sake.

December 4th

II Peter 1 vv 1-21

Again, it is a wonderful privilege to be a Christian, to know God Whom to know is eternal life. God reveals Himself to us & it is by His grace that we receive His revelation of Himself in our hearts and minds. Through Jesus, Who is both human and divine, we humans are made partakers of the divine nature by faith in Him. We have eternal life because we are at one with the Eternal. We make our calling & election sure as we grow in all virtues, such as those listed in vv 5-8. The power comes from God, but we need to co-operate with Him, to tune in to God. I’m using a rather dodgy radio set just now. It keeps wandering off station and producing odd noises, silence, stations I don’t want to hear, or the station I do want to hear muffled and distorted. We need to be tuned in to God. Peter and the other witnesses of the life, death & resurrection of Jesus provide us with an authentic account of the Gospel, in the context of the Scriptures of both testaments, transmitted to us by generations of faithful Christians. This is the wavelength to which we must be tuned, not wandering off onto other frequencies.

December 5th

II Peter 2 vv 1-22

We're having these long readings currently because we're looking at some of the daily readings provided for this season of Advent & then Christmas. The Church on earth is susceptible to error. There are arrogant leaders who think they are smarter than the Bible. There are unscrupulous pastors who use their position to grow rich at the expense of the people they are called to serve. Such people will come under judgment. We can protect ourselves from their influence by a close relationship with God, a prayerful study of the Bible, and respect for *the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*.

December 6th

II Peter 3 vv 1-18

Presumably, Peter was an old man when he wrote this letter. The initial excitement of the spread of the Gospel & the establishment of churches in cities round and about the world as they knew it has perhaps waned. This sometimes happens to Christians who have been converted later in life – initial enthusiasm and then perhaps a cooling of that first love. It's not new & exciting any more. It's like married life after the honeymoon! So people are asking questions. What's happened about our mission to turn the world upside down? When will the world end and Jesus return? When will the wicked get their comeuppance and we Christians go to heaven? Jesus taught us that the Kingdom of God grows like a crop in a field. It's not all at once. He also taught us that the world will end and there will be a universal judgment. So trust God. He knows what He is doing. He's patient. He's giving the world time to turn to Him, to repent. But the Day of Judgment will come and we should always live as people who are ready for it. Then, there *will be new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness*. Some of Peter's readers knew Paul's letters which some, perhaps deliberately, had misunderstood. If you want to grow in grace, read the Bible & pray as members of God's Church, the people of God.

December 7th

I John 1 vv 1-10

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 had seen Jesus in the flesh. They had heard His voice & conversed with Him. They had touched Him. They were witnesses of the wonderful events narrated in the four Gospels. They had fellowship with Jesus, with God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. They had fellowship with one another & all other Christians. They had

eternal life. They were partakers of Christ's abundant joy. How privileged were they. *Jesus said unto Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.* We share the apostles' privilege. Can we do less than live up to our status as Christians?

December 8th (Advent 2)

I John 2 vv 1-14

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.*

He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk, even as he walked. Every cell of our bodies (except red blood cells) contains DNA. It is DNA which causes them to develop to be white blood cells, liver cells, skin cells or whatever. Maybe we can think of Jesus & His Holy Spirit as our DNA. He forms us into the people we are. He fits us for His purposes as part of His Body. He is the very centre and motivating power of our being. Jesus is what unites us whether we're lungs, ankles or eyes. (Red blood cells are formed with DNA, but they lose it later on to make them more efficient in carrying oxygen in the blood. Pursuing this is not helpful to my analogy which seeks to shed light on what it means to be a member of God's Church.)

We have the Word of God: His Word written, the Bible; our daily conversation with Him; the Word made flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ. Our calling is to live up to our Christian status. We do fail, obviously and, when we do, *he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.* But, if we love Him, we shan't be complacent about letting Him down.

December 9th

I John 2 vv 15-29

So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. So why shouldn't we love the world? We should love the world in the sense in which God loves the world. We should long for the salvation

of the peoples of the world. What we should not do is to adopt the values of the world, based on looking after number one first. Selfishness leads to sin which separates us from God. There are deceivers even in the Church, Satan disguised as an angel of light, but trust God. You have the Holy Spirit. You have the Bible. You belong to the fellowship. The Church is the fellowship of the Holy Ghost.

December 10th

Sometimes a light surprises
the Christian while he sings;

I John 3 vv 1-15

it is the Lord who rises
with healing in His wings

I remember nearly 50 years ago kneeling in St Paul's Church Herne Hill and suddenly experiencing a new realisation of what we are praying for and what God grants us in Holy Communion - *that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.* Something similar happened to me at a later date (when I can't remember) with regard to v2 of today's reading: *Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.* Come to think of it the meanings of the two quotations, one from the Prayerbook, one from the Bible, are inextricably bound together.

December 11th

I John 3 v16 – 4 v6

But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother hath need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

I once wrote up this text on the blackboard in a lecture theatre where we were about to hold a meeting to discuss raising funds for Third World charities, as we called them back in the 1970s. John asks a good question. He also gives the only possible answer: *et us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and truth.* Don't just talk the talk; walk the walk. Put your money where your mouth is!

December 12th

I John 4 vv 7-21

Greater is he that is in you , than he that is in the world.

John's writings are so simple and yet so profound that we shall probably not plumb their depths until we are made like Christ, Who is God, Who is love. God loves us so much more than we can imagine. He has created us, He preserves us. He has redeemed us. He supplies us with the means of grace. In Him we have the hope of glory. Knowing Him, we have eternal life. We dwelling in Him & He in us transforms us into His likeness, we become people of love to love God & to love one another. We do fall short, but there is no fear in love, always mercy.

December 13th

I John 5 vv 1-21

Imagine a fire burning in the grate. It gives warmth & light. The coals keep one another burning. If a burning coal falls out onto the cold hard hearth, it smokes a bit, stops burning and becomes cold. It becomes useless, not fulfilling its function. Christianity is like that. It is a fire burning giving warmth and light. It is a fellowship, fellowship with Jesus, fellowship with one another. We sustain one another, Jesus sustains us all, living flames fulfilling our purpose in bringing light and warmth to the world. If we fall out of the fire, if we are separated from Jesus and His Church, falling out into the cold, hard world, our light goes out, we cool, we are of no service to the world, the Church, our Lord, or even ourselves. If you really want to press the analogy, the smoke ascends heavenward, while the ash, the part of us which are lifeless, incombustible, is left behind and periodically removed and thrown away.

December 14th

II John vv 1-13

What are the options? Jesus was just a good man, the best whoever lived perhaps, but still only human. Jesus is God in disguise like the gods of Greek & Roman mythology who were believed to appear sometimes as animals or men He appeared to be a man, but was in fact a god – like Jupiter or Mercury. He was a superman or demigod like Hercules. He was the one true God, to Whom the Scriptures bear witness, disguised as a man. He was or is a tremendously powerful angelic being, superior to all the angels & archangels, the cherubim &

seraphim, but still a created being, made by God. God effectively takes turns to be Father, Son & Holy Ghost in order to fulfil His purposes of creation, redemption & sanctification. Or none of the above?

Obviously, none of the above will suffice. Jesus is totally human – tempted as we are in every respect except sin. He is totally God. God so loved the world that He entered the world and became one of us.

The Word was God...The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Jesus is not merely a myth like Jupiter, Mercury & Hercules. He is not limited in any way as they are limited even in the myths made up about them. Being God, He is eternal. He is not created. There was no time when the Son was not. Father, Son & Holy Ghost are each totally God in all eternity, three persons in the perfect, eternal love.

December 15th (Advent 3)

III John vv 1-14

Yesterday, I tried to say something about the truth which is inseparable from the divine love and how our affiance to the Truth inspires & obliges us to keep His Commandments, summed up in the command to love. In these three letters, John the Apostle works out this principle in the context of what it means for the reality of life in the Church – both the one, holy, catholic & apostolic Church, *militant here in earth & triumphant in heaven*, in general, and in the little local churches in which you and I worship. Our calling is to cleave to the Truth, the truth of Jesus which is love. We have to beware of those who would lead us astray like Diostrophes – too full of his own self-importance – to support good Christians such as Demetrius in their ministry, to bear witness to the Truth of Christ in our lives and support missionaries & evangelists. This Sunday we think about John the Baptist & preparing for the Lord's Return in glory. Pray for yourself & for those who have special responsibilities as God's ministers.

O LORD Jesu Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end.

Amen.

December 16th

Jude vv 1-25

Jude's is not an easy epistle to understand or even to read. He is writing to Christians whose faith & fellowship are threatened by false teachers and would be congregation leaders. Jude draws on the Old Testament and other sources to remind Christians that the people of God have always been troubled by false prophets, rogue priests and divisive and selfish members of congregations throughout history. He reminds his readers of the certainty that there will be judgment on those who lead astray & those who follow them. False teachers & divisive members of the congregation, preying on good people, are *spots in your feasts of charity* (the fellowship, meal, Holy Communion) *when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear*. They need to be dealt with – reformed where possible, excluded where not. *Earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints*.

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.

December 17th

Revelation 1 vv 1-20

I'm not going to try to analyze the symbols which John employs as he seeks to put into words his vision of what is beyond our human comprehension. I just want to stop a moment and invite you to worship in awe.

Immortal, invisible, God only
wise,
in light inaccessible hid from
our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious,
the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great
name we praise.

Unresting, unchanging, and
silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou
rulest in might;
thy justice like mountains high
soaring above
thy clouds, which are fountains
of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest, to both
great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true
life of all;
we blossom and flourish as
leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish but
naught changeth thee.

Great Father of glory, pure
Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all
veiling their sight;
all praise we would render, O
help us to see

'tis only the splendour of light

hideth thee.

December 18th

Revelation 3 vv 7-22

Following the description of John's visions, there are messages from Jesus to each of the seven churches of Asia. (Read the others if you like. There are two Revelation readings set for these days & I'm just taking one of them,) I took these these last two of the seven because many of us tend to see the Church at Laodicea in those days as not unlike the Church of England of today – *lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot*. This should be untrue, but is it? I've heard it said that Anglicans say beautiful prayers, but we don't mean them. Is that true? As we prepare for the Coming of our Lord, this is a good time to examine ourselves. The remedy is to turn whole-heartedly to Christ.

December 19th

Revelation 4 vv 1-11

No man can see God & live. He is literally infinitely too much for us. How could you or I stand in the Presence of the thrice holy God? There are, however, limited visions of heaven and of God in the Old Testament and in the New, deliberately partial so as not to overwhelm the visionary. John's understanding is enlightened by these earlier visions and he shares what God has shown him with us his readers, advancing our understanding insofar as that is possible for mere human beings.. God is ineffable – beyond human telling. We cannot define God. We can, however, worship God in Jesus Christ, Who is *the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature... For it hath pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell*. Our only appropriate response to God's all-embracing love is worship.

December 20th

Revelation 7 vv 1-17

Lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.

When you envisage this great multitude, do you see among them the faces of those whom we love but see no more? Can you see that, by the grace of God, one day your face will be among them?

Lead, kindly Light, amid th'
encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on;

The night is dark, and I am far
from home,
Lead Thou me on;

Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask
to see
The distant scene; one step
enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor prayed
that Thou shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my
path, but now
Lead Thou me on;
I loved the garish day, and
spite of fears,

Pride ruled my will; remember
not past years.

So long Thy pow'r has blest me,
sure it still will lead me on,
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag
and torrent, till the night is
gone,
And with the morn those angel
faces smile,
Which I have loved long since,
and lost awhile.

December 21st (St Thomas)

Ephesians 2 vv 19-22

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 reproved. 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.*

Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed.

There is this tremendous sense of belonging as a Christian. We belong to Jesus. And He belongs to God. We are members one of another – a text I very often quote. We are one with Jesus & with Thomas & the other apostles and with all Christians – the few hundred who saw & believed and that *great multitude, which no man could number* (of which we are a part) – on earth and in heaven. Recently in the vestry before a service, we discussing the difference between Episcopalians & Presbyterianism. It is not that these differences are unimportant; the point is that they are infinitely less importance than that which unites us – the love of God. It doesn't matter who you are, what your background is, to which denomination you belong. If you believe in Jesus you belong to His Church.

The church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is his new creation
By water and the Word.
From heaven he came and
sought her

To be his holy bride;
With his own blood he bought
her,
And for her life he died.

Elect from every nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth;
Her charter of salvation,
One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses,
With every grace endued.

Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed,
Yet saints their watch are
keeping;
Their cry goes up,
"How long?
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song.

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.

December 22nd (Advent 4

Revelation 10 vv 1-11

And swear by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that are therein, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer.

That's an arresting thought *that there should be time no longer*. There is much still to for John & for the Church in every generation to do in terms of proclaiming the Gospel – warnings of judgment, promises of salvation. There will, however, finally be an end to this world of time and space. In every sense we shall inhabit anew dimension.

When the trumpet of the Lord
shall sound and time shall be
no more,
And the morning breaks,
eternal, bright and fair;
When the saved of earth shall
gather over on the other shore,
And the roll is called up
yonder, I'll be there.
*When the roll is called up
yonder,
When the roll is called up
yonder,
When the roll is called up*

*yonder,
When the roll is called up
yonder, I'll be there.*

On that bright and cloudless
morning when the dead in
Christ shall rise,
And the glory of his
resurrection share;
When his chosen ones shall
gather to their home beyond
the skies,
And the roll is called up
yonder, I'll be there.

Let us labour for the Master
from the dawn till setting sun;
Let us talk of all his wondrous
love and care.

Then when all of life is over and
our work on earth is done,
And the roll is called up
yonder, I'll be there.

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 23rd

Revelation 12 vv 1-17

There are lots of ways you can look at this. The woman could be Eve or Israel, Mother Church or Mary. The child could be Jesus or the whole people of God Whom the Son of Man represents. The point is that the devil is decisively defeated by the Cross, but, he is still active till *time shall be no more.*

December 24th

Revelation 15 vv 1-8

We may tell children that Santa won't leave them any presents if they are naughty. Really, of course, we're not going to deprive them of their presents on Christmas morning, however naughty they might have been. Santa is a nice old man and he gives children what they want, not what they deserve. Parents may give children what they deserve, but good parents don't stop loving their children no matter what. There may be punishments as well as presents. Children need to know the difference between right & wrong & behave in accordance with that knowledge. But good parents, however strict they are, are never going to stop loving their children & treating them kindly. So it is with God. There is terrible wickedness done on earth. It requires punishment. The balance has to be restored. The victims of injustice must receive justice as the obverse of the justice meted out to the perpetrators. There is a place for those whose faith is in God, *casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea.* But there are vials filled with the wrath of God prepared for those who reject Him and are unrepentant: murderers, torturers, thieves, those who are indifferent to the needs of the poor, adulterers, abusers, liars, etc. – indeed all those whose lives fall short of the glory

of God. Christmas is not about Santa, a nice old boy who will always do his utmost to give people what they want, but about Jesus, born into the world to pay the price for our iniquity and to open to us the heaven we certainly don't deserve.

December 25th (Christmas Day)

Isaiah 9 vv 1-7

The wonderful light, the Joy which Jesus brings shines out in the darkness of this passing world and overcomes its power so that we may enjoy something of the life of heaven while we are still here on earth.

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 (S Stephen)

Acts 7 vv 55-60

Grant, O Lord, that, in all our sufferings here upon earth for the testimony of thy truth, we may stedfastly 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.*

Stephen is about to be stoned for his testimony to Jesus. He is full of the Holy Ghost. This is the same Holy Ghost Who indwells all Christians so that we can cry to God *Abba Father*. God's power is there for us when we need it. Seeing things as they really are, by the grace of the Holy Ghost, Stephen sees the glory of God & Jesus standing at His right hand. Look to Jesus whatever happens to you, however you feel. Look to Jesus & you will see the glory of God. Empowered by God, Father, Son & Holy Ghost, Stephen is able to follow our Lord's example when He Himself hung on the Cross. Like Jesus, Stephen commends himself to God & prays for his persecutors.

December 27th St John the Evangelist)

John 21 vv 19-25

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.*

If things go as they are expected to go, you will now be awaiting a new rector. You will find it hard to avoid making comparisons between the new guy and me and also my predecessors if you remember them. We clergy too are tempted to compare ourselves with one another. Maybe we're jealous of what we think are their greater gifts. Maybe we think they are wanting when compared with ourselves. But people are different. We have different gifts and different ministries – whether clergy or lay people, just as Peter & John did. What we should be doing is getting on with the work God has given us to do, not making comparisons and speculating about other people & what their calling is.

December 28th (Holy Innocents)

Jeremiah 31 vv 1-8

The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt. God redeemed them and brought them through the Wilderness (with all its temptations and hardships) to the Promised Land. Centuries later, due to their disobedience towards His Holy Law and the Jews' rejection of the prophets God sent them, the Babylonians, as instruments of God, conquered the City of Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and took many of the principal inhabitants into captivity in Babylon. Again God redeemed His people. The exiles returned. The Holy City & the Temple were rebuilt. In Jesus, this pattern is repeated on a cosmic scale. All God's people – Jews and Gentiles – are redeemed from slavery to sin, led through the wilderness of this world (with all its hardships and temptations) to dwell forever in Heaven. This is the Light (Jesus, the Light of the World) in which we read this prophecy of Jeremiah. Vv 15-18 are understood in regard to what happened when Herod killed the boy babies in Bethlehem. Rachel was Israel's (aka Jacob's) wife and is buried at Bethlehem. *We must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God.*

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(Christmas 1)

Revelation 19 vv 1-10

The great whore is Rome – a bloody city, an immoral imperial court, an economy dependent on slavery, persecuting the Church. Though she is very wealthy & very powerful & the wealth of many merchants, traders, etc., depend on her, she will fall. The imagery used for Rome is the same as for other wicked cities: Babylon, Nineveh, Tyre, Sodom. All these prosperous cities founded on violence and corruption are bound to perish – one after the other, and then finally at the end of time when they will be replaced by the City of God.

So be it, Lord; Thy throne shall never,
Like earth's proud empires, pass away:
Thy kingdom stands, and grows forever,
Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway.

December 30th

Revelation 21 vv 1-14

We often read the first seven verses at funerals – the wonderful promise to the Christian dead. We don't usually read v8 – the plight of the damned. If we did read on, we'd need to read that verse in the light of the fact that *God desireth not the death of a sinner*. He doesn't compel us to accept His love, to turn from sin & turn to Him. There is judgment and there is punishment for those who determinedly reject God's love. I like to think that in the end, perhaps when confronted with the full awfulness of the possibilities, everyone will accept Christ and be saved, albeit at the eleventh hour. It would be complacent, however, to assume this. God isn't Santa. We are responsible for what we do with our lives. We are free beings and that freedom enables us to reject God's love for us even if we break His heart in doing so.

We are then given a vision of the Holy City. All Christians re of course saints in this context.

For all the saints who from
their labours rest,
who Thee by faith before the
world confessed;
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever
blest.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Thou wast their Rock, their
Fortress and their Might;
Thou, Lord, their Captain in
the well-fought fight;
Thou, in the darkness drear,
their one true Light.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

O may thy soldiers, faithful,
true, and bold,
Fight as the saints who nobly
fought of old,
And win, with them, the victor's
crown of gold.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

O blest communion, fellowship
divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory
shine;
yet all are one in Thee, for all
are Thine.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

And when the strife is fierce,
the warfare long,
steals on the ear the distant
triumph song,
and hearts are brave again,
and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

December 31st

So we come to the end of another year. *Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.* What will the future have in store for us. Let me quote another of my favourite sayings. *We know not what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future.* God's promises are sure. He is working His purposes out and we each have our part to play. We are all precious to Him. He looks after us in this life. He will take us home. I once heard a story about an old man who was dying. He asked someone to read this chapter from v 16. When the reader had read the first two words, *Jesus*, the old man said that is enough & passed peacefully.

O God, our Help in ages past,
our Hope for years to come,
our Shelter from the stormy
blast,
and our eternal Home.

The golden evening brightens in
the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors
comes their rest:
Sweet is the calm of Paradise
the blest.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

But then there breaks a still
more glorious day:
the saints triumphant rise in
bright array;
the King of glory passes on His
way.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

From earth's wide bounds,
from ocean's farthest coast,
through gates of pearl streams
in the countless host,
in praise of Father, Son, and
Holy Ghost.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Revelation 22 vv 6-21

Under the shadow of Thy
throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
sufficient is Thine arm alone,
and our defence is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,
or earth received its frame,
from everlasting Thou art God,
to endless years the same.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
are like an evening gone,
short as the watch that ends
the night
before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever-rolling
stream
bears all its sons away;
they fly forgotten, as a dream
dies at the op'ning day.

O God, our Help in ages past,
our Hope for years to come,
be Thou our Guard while life
shall last,
and our eternal Home!