

The Gospel According to St Luke

Bible Notes
October - December
2021

October 1st

Luke 1 vv 1-4

I was surprised to notice that it is a long time since we looked at Luke's Gospel in these notes. For many people, it is their favourite Gospel. So, who is this Theophilus to whom it is written? Maybe it was a man called Theophilus who had come to faith and now wanted and needed to know all about Jesus. On the other hand, the name Theophilus means "Lover of God" and perhaps Luke was writing for everyone who loves God and wants to know more. Traditionally, the Gospel is believed to have been written by Luke the physician and friend and companion of St Paul, who is also believed to be the author of the Acts of the Apostles. Luke is a fine historian and writes very good Greek – some would say the best in the New Testament. *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.* It matters very much that we know the truth about Jesus, the things that He did, the teaching He gave.

October 2nd

Luke 1 vv 5-7

If you read a bible translation which closely follows the rhythms of the original, you will notice an abrupt change in style here. Vv 1-4 could come from a classical Greek or Latin history. V5 and the verses following read much more like Hebrew. It's as if we were back in the Old Testament. The story following echoes the histories of Isaac, Sampson and Samuel, all following God's direct intervention born to women believed to be barren. Like those three, Elisabeth's child will be a special child and grow into a man with a very particular mission. Even more so, the child of Elisabeth's cousin Mary. John the Baptist could be said to be the last of the Old Testament prophets, preparing the way for Jesus as the whole Old Testament prepares the way for the New.

Childlessness is still something which many couples find hard to accept and turn to the miracles of modern medicine to give them a baby. We are thankful that we live in times when these things can be possible, but they very often don't succeed. People in this position need our prayers and our love. So do professionals working in this very difficult field. Every life is a miracle and every human child has a vocation. He or she is created by God and loved by God and each one of us has been made for a purpose.

October 3rd (Trinity 18)

Luke 1 vv 8-14

There were many priests and they were arranged in 24 “courses” according to their lineage. Each course ministered in the Temple for two weeks in the year. The tasks they had to perform were assigned by lot. To offer the incense was considered the most honourable task because the smoke of the incense signified the ascent of the prayers of the faithful to heaven. Each priest was only allowed to do this once. So this would have been the greatest day of Zacharias’ life anyway. The fact that he saw the angel of the LORD and what the angel promised him is beyond our human imaginations to appreciate. I wonder if we are sufficient receptive to the awesome wonder of God when we pray? I fear that I am not.

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

October 4th

Luke 1 vv 15-17

In the OT (Numbers 6), we read about provisions for a man or a woman who wished to take the vow of a Nazarite. They were to drink no wine or to eat grapes. They were not to cut their hair or to shave. This was for a defined period – a special time devoted to God. The only actual Nazarites we know by name are, however, were life long Nazarites: Sampson, Samuel & John the Baptist. Presumably, their whole lives were dedicated to God in a special way. All God’s people are called to devote themselves wholly to God, to be dedicated to Him full time. There are some, however, who, within the royal priesthood of all the people of God, are called to serve as priests or monks or nuns. Also, for all Christians, particular times set apart each day for prayer, occasional quiet days or retreats may be an important part of our lifelong relationship with God.

Elijah epitomised what it is to be a prophet – to be God’s messenger, to proclaim God’s Word. It came to be thought that Elijah would return to earth to prepare the way for the coming of the Kingdom of God. John comes in the spirit and power of Elijah.

October 5th

Luke 1 vv 18-20

No doubt, Zacharias and Elisabeth had been praying for a child for years. Now Zacharias doubted what God was promising him, even though God’s Word came from the lips of an angel and Zacharias himself would have been very familiar with the stories of Isaac, Sampson and Samuel. *Your God is too small* is the title of a book by J B Philips. We don’t realise just how great God is and therefore we don’t understand that He is with us in all the challenges we face in life. We can’t expect miracles to order, though they are not impossible and they do happen, but we can be sure that God can and does look after us. Our part is to have faith in Him.

October 6th

Luke 1 vv 21 & 22

There are some pretty horrific stories in the Bible of people being struck down because they didn’t show God sufficient respect. The crowd were probably wondering whether Zacharias on his own at the altar of incense had in some way offended God and been similarly struck down.

We find such stories difficult. God is love. We find it hard to believe that He would strike anyone down for failing to respect Him. God certainly is love and His most complete and perfect manifestation of Himself to us on earth is in *Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.* What we may have done, however, is effectively to domesticate God. *Your God is too small.* The fear is gone. The awe is gone. Yet the Bible tells us that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. God ought not to be disrespected. He is not an irrelevance. He is not a comfort blanket to draw around us when we are cold or frightened. He is the living God. *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (Hebrews 10³¹). *For our God is a consuming fire* (Hebrews 12²⁹). God isn’t to be treated casually.

That it may please thee to give us an heart to love and dread thee, and diligently to live after thy commandments; We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

October 7th

Luke 1 vv 23-25

My grandmother taught be not to be too easily embarrassed. We can be very self conscious and wonder what other people are thinking of us. Dare I open my mouth in this august company? Can I go to the ball although I can't afford a new dress? What will people think if I paint my house vermillion and turquoise – my two favourite colours? Can I take off my shirt in church if a bee flies down inside it? Would the answer be different if I were a woman? Would it be different if I were really allergic to bee stings? Am I prepared to admit that I'm lost and ask the way of that passing pedestrian? On some of these issues, we should possibly defer to public opinion. On others we should stand our ground. Nobody has the right to look down on us because we're not very erudite or can't afford nice clothes or because we do something unconventional. We shouldn't be put off saying what we believe to be right because other people (even on social media) would condemn us for saying it. Elisabeth apparently was embarrassed at her age to be obviously pregnant. She had nothing to be ashamed of and if people disapproved or made fun, they were the ones who were in the wrong. I can imagine that we might have our doubts about women we read about in the news media who receive fertility treatment in the hope of conceiving long after the normal age of child-bearing. Will they be strong enough to carry a child and look after a baby? What will happen to the child when they die? But, once it's a fait accompli, whatever we think, we have to support the people involved if not their decision. People do make unwise decisions, wrong decisions even, but we still have a Christian duty of love towards them.

October 8th

Luke 1 vv 26-38

How often have we heard these words? At home, at school, at church. Maybe, we've read them ourselves from the lectern at carol services. Reading passages like these as part of our formal worship, my personal preference is definitely the King James Bible. There is the emotional sense, the wonder, the familiar, the love, as well as the literal sense of the story, in which to revel.

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

October 9th

Luke 1 vv 26 & 27

Now let's look at this passage in detail. Mary is espoused to Joseph. Espousal is more binding than engagement, but they are still not married. Joseph is a descendant of the great King David. In the Old Testament, there are so many prophecies and promises which are made to David and his successors. But David himself was far from perfect. The great thing about David is that he kept close to God in love even though he was a terrible sinner. David was a very open and engaging kind of guy. The kings who followed in David's line, many of them, were a disappointment. The Bible story is not a story of great human men and women – heroes. The Bible story is of human failure and divine steadfastness, of God's faithfulness and our faithlessness. The Bible is realistic. Humanity fouls things up. Salvation in this life and the next, on earth and in heaven, depends on God alone. God is dependable. Human beings are not. So the promises made to David can only be fulfilled by God. We long for a Saviour. Only God can save us. The promises made to David and his successors, the promise of the blessings which would follow from the everlasting kingdom of great David's greater Son could only be fulfilled in Jesus – sinless Son of Mary born in the world, eternal Son of God, Begotten of His Father before all worlds, eternally begotten.

October 10th (Trinity 19)

Luke 1 vv 28-30

According to an evangelist I once heard speak at a mission, when angels appear to mortals they begin what they have to say with the words *Fear not*. The one exception is Mary who is greeted with *Hail, thou art highly favoured*. Nevertheless, unsurprisingly, Mary is troubled by the angel's words and Gabriel has to fall back on *Fear not*. I wonder how you or I would react if we saw an angel? The basic meaning of the word is messenger. Sometimes human messengers were called angels – people who conveyed messages between human beings. Sometimes the word angel is used for prophets who bring messages from God to human beings. But, most often, the word angel means an awe-inspiring heavenly being. In the Bible, we meet angels who are messengers, guardian angels, angels who are warriors. Perhaps we most often think of the hosts of angels (and cherubim and seraphim) worshipping at the Throne of Grace. How would we feel if addressed by an angel? PTO.

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 11th

Luke 1 vv 30-33

Mary had indeed found amazing favour with God. She was to be the mother of His Son. The Name Jesus (or Joshua in the OT version) means something like the LORD saves. The *Jo* part is derived from the Hebrew for the LORD as it is in names like John, Jonathan and Joel (but not Joseph). Kings of Israel were sometimes thought of as sons of God (as in Psalm 2). But that was a metaphor. They were ordinary human beings with human fathers who were honorary adopted sons of God because they were Israel's heads of state. Jesus is literally the Son of God. He has no human father. He is eternally begotten of the Father. So psalms like Psalm 2 which were originally used metaphorically of the Kings of Israel in the OT are used literally of Jesus in the NT. He is the true Son of God. We are His brothers and sisters. So we too are literally the children of God by adoption. In Jesus all the promises to and through David are fulfilled, just as all the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus. The Kingdom of Jesus is eternal. He rules over all God's people, all the world, over the house of Jacob (the Jews) and over the gentiles - *a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues*. There is no limit to the mission of the Church.

October 12th

Luke 1 vv 34 & 35

Every human being is made in the image of God. Every human being is made to be a child of God. Every life is a miracle, a gift of God. Every human being has infinite value. These facts determine how we ought to behave towards one another. God is love and we are made in the image of God. This is the foundation on which every act of compassion is built. Yet, in us, the image of God is marred, marred by sin, our human rebellion against the love of God. Jesus alone is without sin. In His human life, Jesus eternally fulfils what it is to be truly human – just as He is eternally God. So Jesus reunites God's rebellious creation with the Creator God. So Jesus restores what we in our sinfulness have destroyed. In Jesus we have eternal love, eternal life.

October 13th

Luke 1 vv 36-38

Mary wonders how such things can possibly be. The angel points her to what God has already done. Elisabeth, Mary's cousin, is expecting a child in her old age. *With God nothing is impossible*. Time after time, characters in the psalms and other parts of the Bible find faith and hope in the challenges they face by considering what God has already done – both in their own lives and in the history of the people of God and in His mighty works in creation and in His eternal providence guiding the affairs of all the nations.

When upon life's billows you
are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged,
thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings,
name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what
the Lord has done.

Count your blessings, name
them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what
God has done!
Count your blessings, name
them one by one,
And it will surprise you what
the Lord has done.

Are you ever burdened with a
load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you
are called to bear?

Count your many blessings,
every doubt will fly,
And you will keep singing as
the days go by.

When you look at others with
their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised
you His wealth untold;
Count your many blessings—
money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven, nor
your home on high.

So, amid the conflict whether
great or small,
Do not be discouraged, God is
over all;
Count your many blessings,
angels will attend,
Help and comfort give you to
your journey's end.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.

Whatever God asks of us, men or women, Mary's answer is the example for us to follow.

October 14th

Luke 1 vv 39-46

How much do babies in the womb know of the outside world? They certainly experience the internal sounds and movements of their mothers' bodies. It seems likely that, once their ears have developed, they can hear sounds from the outside world at least to some degree. Some people think that – muffled as their hearing must be – babies still in the womb begin to recognise the rhythms of music and language and even individual words. Whatever the truth of all this, the unborn John the Baptist recognised (presumably miraculously) that this woman who had come to visit his mother was in fact the Mother of the Son of God. Elisabeth was certainly able to interpret John's movement within her in this light.

The more I think about all this, the more concerned I become about the increasingly casual attitude to abortion in modern society. Recent figures indicate that a quarter of pregnancies in the UK are now deliberately terminated. We cannot deny that the embryo or foetus is a human life. It cannot be right to extinguish a human life without very good cause. We can debate whether abortion ought to be legal in any circumstances at all such as very significant risk to the mother, the child or the rest of the family (as envisaged in the 1967 Abortion Act), but surely we can agree that abortions should never be performed lightly or for casual reasons. I suppose, someone might demand what do I mean by *lightly or for casual reasons*. If you want to discuss it, we'll do so where there is more space than there is here.

October 15th

Luke 1 vv 46-55

A lot of people have said how much they enjoyed Evensong, but, by and large, people stopped coming to it and, except in big churches and cathedrals, there is no public sung Evensong even on Sundays. Yet Evensong is growing in popularity in the places where they do have it and on the radio. There's a fair number of people who are not Christians who value attending Evensong. I wonder if the beauty of the words and music conveys to them something of the beauty of holiness opening up to them the possibility of faith in the Gospel message.

Mattins and Evensong are largely made up of quotations from Scripture and we have lost out in forgetting what we once knew by heart.

October 16th

Luke I vv 46-49

God gave Mary a most wonderful gift – to be the Mother of His Son. She is overwhelmed with wonder and gratitude at the way He is using her in His plan for the salvation of His creation. She has this tremendous part to play, to which she assented in her love and faith. Mary humbly accepted God's condescension to her in making her the instrument of His purposes. She was marvellously blessed, as all generations recognise, and we bless her for her part in our redemption.

Every one of us Christians has his or her part in God's plan for the world. We are blessed to be chosen to help fulfil His purposes. Accept your part in God's plan with grace, humility and willing assent and you are blessed.

October 17th (Trinity 20)

Luke 1 vv 50-53

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

Perhaps too familiar with the Magnificat, maybe associating it with magnificent cathedrals and exquisite singing on the part of highly trained choristers, we may sometimes miss how radical it is. Choral Evensong sung by a cathedral choir school is, in a way, very establishment. Without meaning to be, it is something more likely to be appreciated by the comfortably off. Yet the Magnificat praises God for His promises to the poor, the lowly and the hungry. It warns of judgment coming on those who are rich and powerful and indifferent (or even hostile) to the needs of the poor. The Magnificat invites us to reflect on whether we are ready to *cheerfully accomplish those things that though wouldest have done*; if that means giving up our time, talents and possessions for the benefit of other people in greater need than we are.

October 18th (S Luke)

Luke 1 vv 54-56

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.*

Luke the doctor was also an evangelist, a physician of the soul. The Gospel heals us, body, mind and spirit. Christ is our Healer. In telling the Gospel story, Luke shows us the truth about Jesus by revealing how He fulfils God's eternal plan as already set out in the Old Testament. The coming of Jesus is implicit in the promises made by God in the OT back as far as Abraham, back as far as Noah and even Adam & Eve (Genesis 3¹³⁻¹⁵, which we often read at Christmas.) We'd understand the NT if we knew the OT better, yet we dismiss the OT too quickly because we find parts of it unpalatable and fail to read it ourselves or to teach it to our children. The result is that we miss the point of much of the NT and the Church becomes curiously adrift from the Word of God, which is the treasure with which we have been entrusted.

October 19th

Luke 1 vv 57-66

This is a scene we know well. We may feel that the assembled relatives too quickly dismissed what the child's mother had to say. In the providence of God, however, this gave Zacharias the opportunity to declare publicly the name the angel had given the child before his conception. Zacharias had obviously been rendered deaf as well as dumb because he failed to trust the words of God's messenger. Zacharias now conforms to God's will for his life and he is set free to live his life in accordance with the will of Him Whose service is perfect freedom.

October 20th

Luke 1 vv 67-69

We call Zacharias' song the Benedictus and sing it at Mattins, which has become even more rare than Evensong. I would say that, if people are only going to Church once on a Sunday, they should celebrate Holy Communion – the service which Jesus Himself instructed us to observe. There is a loss, however, in missing out on these services of the Word.

All the more important then to pray everyday alone or with others and to read the Bible daily in the context of worship.

October 21st

Luke 1 vv 70-75

The birth of John, the forerunner of Jesus, is part of God's plan already revealed in the OT – the Law & the Prophets – and confirmed by God's oath. This is all the outworking of Providence as are our own personal lives, the progress of human history, and indeed everything which happens in the cosmos. It is all of God. God is in overall charge. We can trust Him for our lives, for our loved ones, for the future of the world. Because of God there is always hope. We know this by faith. *And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given to us.* (Romans 5⁵).

That we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies : might serve him without fear. There is a purpose in our redemption, not that we should stand idle and do nothing worthwhile with our lives, but *serve him without fear*, doing God's work in the world, exalting the humble and meek and filling the hungry with good things.

October 22nd

Luke 1 vv 76-80

Light in the darkness. There are many reasons why people may be said to be dwelling in darkness. Think of the terrible wars which rage, the chronic poverty in which so many people live, terrible natural disasters, disease, including the COVID pandemic, homelessness, ignorance and unbelief, oppressive government, the crushing of conscience and faith, anarchy and chaos in the world, bereavement, depression, fear, perplexity, disappointment, loneliness, despair, crime and its consequences, addiction. We may be more or less aware of the darkness in which other people and sometimes we ourselves dwell.

1 Through the night of doubt
and sorrow
onward goes the pilgrim band,
singing songs of expectation,
marching to the promised land.

light;
pilgrim clasps the hand of
pilgrim,
stepping fearless through the
night.

2 Clear before us through the
darkness
gleams and burns the guiding

3 One the light of God's own
presence
o'er his ransomed people shed,

chasing far the gloom and
terror,
brightening all the path we
tread:

4 One the object of our journey,
one the faith which never tires,
one the earnest looking
forward,
one the hope our God inspires:

5 One the strain that lips of
thousands
lift as from the heart of one;
one the conflict, one the peril,
one the march in God begun:

6 One the gladness of rejoicing
on the far eternal shore,

where the one almighty Father
reigns in love for evermore.

7 Onward, therefore, Christian
pilgrims,
onward with the cross our aid;
bear its shame, and fight its
battle,
till we rest beneath its shade.

8 Soon shall come the great
awaking,
soon the rending of the tomb;
then the scattering of all
shadows,
and the end of toil and gloom.

October 23rd

Luke 2 vv 1-7

I've got a tape somewhere of my Sunday School class reading this story and other passages from the nativity fifty years ago. For all sorts of reasons, these verses are very dear to our hearts – bringing to mind Christmases past and present, Christmases shared with our loved ones at home, Christmases in Church and maybe Christmases spent away from home and our duties have kept us away from Church. But whatever they mean to us in human terms, their divine meaning is such that I cannot put it into words. And so the Christmas collect.

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*

October 24th (Trinity 21)

Luke 2 vv 8-20

But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

How often have we read the story of the shepherds? How often have we heard it read to us in Church? How often have we seen this scene enacted in children's nativity plays? But what does it mean to us. Have we pondered all these things and kept them in our hearts? PTO

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 25th

Luke 2²¹

Being only one verse, the story of the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus, when read in church, tends to get absorbed either into what went before or into what follows. It is, however, a significant event in its own right. Jesus fulfilled all the requirements of the Jewish Law – one of which was the circumcision of first born males. He set us free from the ritual requirements of the Law. He saved us. His Name means that the LORD saves us. He did not, however, set us free of the moral and ethical requirements of the Law. He set us free from sin in order that we might be free to keep God's Law, summarised in the twin commandments to love God and to love one another. We don't obey the rules in order to escape punishment for breaking them. We observe God's Law because it is our nature to do so if we are Christians. We very often fail and lapse into sin. The flesh lusts against the spirit. But, as we grow to know Jesus better, so we become more like Him – perfect love in human form. Perhaps, from my own experience, I should say that, by His grace, we become a little more like Him!

October 26th

Luke 2 vv 22-24

I find this story a bit confusing & I'm glad that the commentators do too! I'm not the only one. There are two things going on here. The first born males of both human beings and animals belonged especially to God following the tenth plague of Egypt – the death of the firstborn at Passover – which finally persuaded Pharaoh to let the Hebrew slaves go free. Because of this, first born males had to be redeemed either with a sacrifice or with a monetary payment. This appears to be what is happening here with regard to Jesus. New mothers were considered ritually "unclean" – two weeks for a girl, forty days for a boy. They then had to be purified with a sacrifice – a lamb if you could afford it or two pigeons if, like Joseph and Mary, you were too poor. There is something of a legacy of this in the service of Churching or Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child. Birth is a miracle, a wonder. The coming of a new life into the world is a holy thing. The mother perhaps needs a time out from the common things of life.

October 27th

Luke 2 vv 25-32

Again a canticle we use in Christian worship – this time the Nunc Dimittis, sung by Simeon when he held the infant Messiah in his arms. When we say or sing these words, we may well think of departing this world in peace at the end of our time here on earth. *Teach me to live, that I may dread the grave as little as my bed. Teach me to die, that so I may, rise glorious at the awful day.* We should also think about the Light of Christ shining in this world for both Jews and Gentiles, illuminating our paths, leading us home. We too are lights of the world as we reflect the Light of Christ in our lives, making this world a brighter place for the people among whom we live and move and have our being.

October 28th (S Simon & S Jude)

Luke 2 vv 33-35

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.*

Simeon reveals to Mary something of what Jesus will accomplish. He uses those terrible words *Yea, a sword shall pass through your own soul also.* This is a prophecy of the Crucifixion. Think of it, holding a baby less than six weeks old and foreseeing that child's terrible death. Did we but know what awaits so many children born into this world of sin. Think of the mother giving birth to a child, nursing and caring for that child and such terrible things happening to him or her. What you would do to protect a child from *sin, the world and the devil?* (Baptism is a very good start!) There might be poverty, abuse, neglect, disease, accident, *lightning, tempest, plague, pestilence and famine, battle, murder and sudden death.* All sorts of horrors might await children being born in the world today. But it doesn't have to be like that. We can all do our bit to lighten the darkness, to follow the Maker's instructions in order to make the world function properly. And Jesus shares everything it is to be human. He redeems our humanity. He consoles us and saves us.

By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision; by thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation, *Good Lord, deliver us.* By thine Agony and Bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion; by thy precious Death and Burial; by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension, and by the Coming of the Holy Ghost, *Good Lord, deliver us.*

October 29th

Luke 2 vv 36-40

The old 1662 BCP provides for the whole of Luke 2²⁻⁴⁰ to be read on 2nd February – 40th day of Christmas, the Purification of Mary, Candlemas. The Alternative Service Book of 1980 leaves out today's verses regarding Hannah – presumably to shorten what some people might consider to be too long a reading. Common Worship, authorised from 2,000 restores these verses, very likely to avoid excluding the woman Hannah who told people about Jesus as well as the man Simeon. I mention this because it's worth being aware of how taking readings out of context can obscure (or even change) the meaning. We really ought to read the Bible in its entirety. On the other hand, it is unrealistic to read too much at one sitting. Our minds wander. We lose the thread. We miss the detail. We skim the depths.

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

October 30th

Luke 2 vv 41-52

This is a difficult story for parents of young children. It is a good biblical principle that children should obey their parents. Wise parents use their God-given authority to keep their children safe and to teach them to live good and righteous lives. It is terrifying to lose a child.

Yet, in this story, the twelve year old Jesus, Who must have known that His family and friends were heading back to Nazareth and that Mary and Joseph would be worried and upset if He were not with them, remained in the Temple in conversation with the learned scholars who spent their time there. Children do get absorbed in what they are doing and lose track of time. Perhaps talking to the doctors of the Law was more important than going home with Mary & Joseph. If there were a conflict between God's Will and the will of any human child's parent's will, it would be God's Will that the child should obey. But how would a child know that God wanted him to do something different from what a parent wanted? Jesus was (and is) as human as any of the rest of us and subject to the same temptations. Yet, totally obedient to the Will of God, He has a clarity of insight which is denied to us sinners.

October 31st (Trinity 22)

Luke 3 vv 1-6

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.*

Nearly thirty years have passed and Luke dates the beginning of the mission of S John the Baptist by the reigns of the people in charge in the Holy Land at the time – a method of dating common in the ancient world and sometimes used in solemn legal documents today. According to the document I received at my institution it says: In testimony whereof Our Episcopal Seal is affixed to these presents, and We have subscribed the same this Second day of January One thousand nine hundred and eighty-seven and in the twenty-sixth year of Our Consecration. David Roffen. (Roffen means Rochester – Bishop of.)

John comes to proclaim the Word of God, to preach the Gospel at a particular time and a particular place. He proclaims and fulfils the words of Scripture. How we need people today, raised up by God, to teach us what is His Will for us, for the Church and for the world. Pray that God will send such people to us.

November 1st (All Saints)

Luke 3 vv 7-18

What are saints? They are people who eagerly expect the Kingdom of God. They don't rely on their own merits or status. They confess their sins. They know that there is judgment to come. Their consciences teach them right from wrong – consciences which grow more sensitive as they themselves grow closer to the Lord. They live their lives – personal, family, social and working, as well as their religious lives – in accordance with God's Law of love. They know their unworthiness of Jesus and His power to save. They are baptised with water and the Holy Spirit. They are what you and I are and what we are becoming.

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

November 2nd (All Souls)

Luke 3 vv 16&17

All Souls Day last year was, the last day on which we were able to hold public services before the churches were closed again for the second lockdown. I remember one person's joy that she had been able to attend. All Souls Day is a day when we especially remember those who have died in the Lord – those whom we love but see no more, those from whom we are divided only by that narrow stream of death. I'm still conflicted about all those weeks when our churches were closed for COVID. On the one hand, it is true that, in the early stages of the pandemic, the virus was spread by large congregations of churchgoers attending worship in tightly packed services. It is also true that the government wisely wanted us to limit our contacts with other people as far as possible, only to go out for things that are essential. However, those of us brought up to admire Christians who, from Roman times until the present day, have been prepared to face martyrdom rather than *forsake the assembling of themselves together*, were stunned when we were told that, while it was accepted as essential to go shopping for *the bread which perisheth* and to take the bodily exercise which S Paul says *profiteth little*, public worship was declared to be as inessential as having a haircut. To be fair, considering the fact that religious services were a major source of infection in other countries in the early stages of the pandemic, it was probably the right decision to close down public worship for a time. Even if we ourselves are not afraid to die, we cannot risk making ourselves a burden on the already overstretched NHS or risk infecting other people who do not share with us *the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life*. But still, our worship on earth, especially Holy Communion, is an expression of our relationship with God and our fellow Christians, of the eternal life which we have in Him. We proclaim all that He has done for us, including the fact that by His Death He has destroyed death. We receive tokens of His Promise that we shall live forever with Him. We are strengthened for the journey and guided on our way by His gift of Himself to us in the consecrated bread and wine. If we could find a safe way to shop in the Co-op, couldn't we have found a safe way to worship in Church? I hope none of us would think that it is less important to go to Church than to go to the Co-op, but maybe worship alone or worship online is sufficient for our spiritual health. I'm really not sure. PTO

Let saints on earth in concert
sing
with those who work is done;
for all the servants of our King
in heaven and earth are one.

One family, we dwell in him,
one Church, above, beneath,
though now divided by the
stream,
the narrow stream of death.

One army of the living God,
to his command we bow;
part of the host have crossed

the flood,
and part are crossing now.

E'en now to their eternal home
there pass some spirits blest;
while others to the margin
come,
waiting their call to rest..

Jesus, be thou our constant
Guide;
then, when the word is given,
bid Jordan's narrow stream
divide,
and bring us safe to heaven.

November 3rd

Luke 3 vv 18-20

Herod divorced his own wife in order to marry Herodias the wife of his brother Philip. So Philip & Herodias also had to be divorced. Herodias was also the niece of both men. So the whole caboodle was far from wholesome and John was brave enough to say so. He also condemned many other evils perpetrated by Herod. *Speaking truth to power* is something which has to be done, but it can be dangerous. Some people, like John, have a particular vocation to speak out against what is wrong in the world – not only prophets, but journalists, writers, opposition politicians and many more. They need our support and our prayers. We do all of us, however, have to be faithful to the truth even if our faithfulness to the truth makes life more difficult for us. Remember all the ordinary people who are shunned, mocked or persecuted for their integrity.

ALMIGHTY God, by whose providence thy servant John Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of thy Son our Saviour, by preaching of repentance; Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

I can't help but add that this is true to of businesses and institutions (including the Church) and those who work for them. Only too often these are more concerned about good public relations than honesty and decency. It is important that we do not become complicit in this.

November 4th

Luke 3 vv 21&22 (+ 23-38 if you have stamina)

God acknowledges Jesus as His Son, but what does this mean? Adam was the son of God. All human beings are children of God. Apart from Jesus, we are prodigal sons, who leave our Father's house and waste our substance and bring ourselves into a state of degradation, but the Father longs to welcome us home and is always ready to forgive, to wash us clean, to clothe us in fine garments and invite us to the feast. Jesus is the only human being Who has fulfilled His duty towards our heavenly Father. He sets us free from sin in order that we may do our duty to God and share in the blessings which belong to His family.

The King of Israel, the Anointed One, was also known as the Son of God. Anointed by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Through His grace, if we turn to God, repent of our sins and are baptised with Him, we too are kings and priests who will reign with Him for ever.

Jesus is God the Son, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. *Such as the Father is, such is the Son : and such is the Holy Ghost.... For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess : that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds : and Man of the substance of his Mother, born in the world; Perfect God and perfect Man : of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead : and inferior to the Father, as touching his manhood; Who, although he be God and Man : yet he is not two, but one Christ; One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh : but by taking of the Manhood into God; One altogether; not by confusion of Substance : but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man : so God and Man is one Christ;*

Jesus unites the human and the divine. He brings about the Atonement. He makes us one with God.

Firmly I believe and truly
God is Three, and God is One;
and I next acknowledge duly
manhood taken by the Son.

And I trust and hope most fully
in that Manhood crucified;
and each thought and deed unruly
do to death, as he has died.

November 5th

Luke 4 vv 1-13

⁵ And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. ⁶ And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. ⁷ If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine.

Jesus had come to reign over the kingdoms of the earth. Given all that wealth and power how much good could He have done! At that moment, apparently, He could have cut out the three year mission around Galilee & Judaea, He could have bypassed the Cross and become King of the world there and then. All He had to do was to worship the devil.

The conspirators in the Gun Powder Plot believed that they had a good and righteous cause, to restore what they believed to be the true Christian religion (Roman Catholicism) in England. They could have put their trust in prayer for that outcome. They could have spoken out for it and suffered martyrdom for the RC cause as many did. If it had been God's Will for England at that time to be reunited with Rome, such methods would have succeeded eventually. Instead, they foolishly adopted the devil's methods. They attempted to blow up the English (Scottish) King and parliament. They suffered terrible punishments at the hands of the authorities. They set back by a long way any prospect of a reconciliation between Canterbury and Rome. The end does not justify the means. We cannot achieve God's purposes by using the devil's methods.

November 6th

Luke 4 vv 1-4

I did want to discuss the second temptation on 5th November! In a way today's temptation takes us back to the COVID restrictions. What is really essential in life? Air, water, food, we'd be dead quite quickly if we lost access to any of them. Some exercise is vital if we are to be healthy. Most of us have a need for human company – friends, family, relationships. We are impoverished if we have no access to beauty or something to exercise our minds. Our access to all of these things (except perhaps air) was restricted by the COVID regulations though efforts were made to try to prevent us from being completely cut off from any of them. But what does Jesus say really matters, more important even than bread?

November 7th (Trinity 23)

Luke 4 vv 9-13

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.*

When I was a teenager, I was warned by caring family members not to be careless of my personal safety in the belief that God would look after me even if I was foolish and reckless. I was also gently mocked by atheist friends who claimed to think it odd that someone who believed that the next life was better than this one insisted on walking home late at night via the road rather than cut through the woods. Yes, we can trust God to look after us, but don't put Him to the test. We do our bit by behaving sensibly.

November 8th

Luke 4 vv 14 & 15

Indifference troubles me more than opposition. If people are hostile to Jesus and what He stands for, I'm quite happy to debate with them and to pray for them. I hope I'd be happy if my loyalty to Jesus led me to suffer at the hands of His enemies. Naturally, I welcome people who share my faith in Jesus. But indifference I don't understand. If God is at all, He is everything. If God is not everything, He is nothing. The people flocked to hear Jesus. Some gave their lives to Him. Some bitterly opposed Him. But they responded to Jesus, one way or the other. What are we doing wrong given that a large proportion of our population are indifferent to the message with which God has entrusted us?

November 9th

Luke 4 vv 16-21

Are there any clues here as to why people responded to Jesus but are largely indifferent to the Gospel we preach? In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus starts by reading the Bible. Do we C21 Christians ourselves sufficiently value the Scriptures? Do we read it sufficiently? Do we read it prayerfully? Do we recognise that it is the Word of God? Do we read it publicly and proclaim that the Bible is the Word of God? Or do we edit it, explain away the passages we find uncomfortable and neglect it? Jesus then preached a sermon demonstrating the way the ancient text applied to His hearers that day? Can we do this when we preach the Gospel in this our day both in our words & in our deeds?

Finally, a synagogue is a coming together for worship. Have we to easily *forsaken the assembling of ourselves together*, forgetting that He is especially present where two or three are gathered together in His Name?

November 10th

Luke 4 vv 22-24

But are we too familiar, too ordinary? This has been a nominally Christian country for more than a thousand years. There are church buildings in most towns and villages and cathedrals in cities. We have become part of the furniture. Over the centuries, we have tried with some success to make England a more Christian country, but it has been a two way street. The Church herself has conformed to the ways of the world. Being part of the establishment cuts both ways. It puts us in a position to influence our the ways of the world. Do we need to let the world see how different we Christians are as a result of our knowing Jesus? Maybe, they would flock to hear us. Maybe they would crucify us. But either way we'd be doing more good in the world than we can do if people are indifferent to us.

November 11th

Luke 4 vv 25-27

We pray for people who are sick or in some other kind of trouble. Maybe they have always been good people. We're sure that they ought to be cured. Maybe they are suffering dreadfully. So why doesn't God answer our prayers and heal them? Maybe we can't have too many miracles. That could really mess up the laws of Science which describe a universe which operates regularly and predictably. Miracles really are for special occasions. Usually they are signs that God is working in a special way. But He can and does heal by non-miraculous means. So why doesn't He cure this or that person we're praying for? In the end, we have to trust God that He knows what He is doing. He knows much better than we do why things are as they are. We just have to accept that. But there are considerations. One is that the final healing is death. Death isn't the ultimate failure. It is the gateway to a life in which there is no more suffering, a place of eternal love. If we didn't all die eventually, this world would be very crowded! Pain protects us from carelessly damaging ourselves. Our suffering may build character. The sufferings of other people provide us with an opportunity to care...

November 12th

Luke 4 vv 28-30

Well Jesus certainly provoked a reaction! At first, they were eager to hear Him, but, when they heard what He had to say, they turned against Him. The Christian message is not always popular and numbers are a very poor guide by which to measure a preacher's effectiveness. More often than not in the bible, the popular preacher is the one telling people what they want to hear and the preacher telling people what God wants them to hear is rejected. I'm very suspicious of the Church of England using *Statistics for Mission* as an important tool in developing its strategy. The most important tool of all is to ask God what He wants us to tell the people of England. Then we tell them and they will know that there has been a prophet among them whether they will hear or whether they will forbear (Ezekiel 2⁵). Anyway, the mob at Nazareth can't touch Jesus. He hour is not yet come. God will look after us and our time to die will come when He is good & ready to take us home.

November 13th

Luke 4 vv 31-37

I remember my old headmaster emphasising what this story says about Jesus preaching with authority and power. There is nothing tentative about what He says. There are no ifs or buts. He proclaims the Word of God and backs up His words with deeds. A lesson for the Church!

November 14th (Trinity 24 Remembrance Sunday)

Luke 4 vv 38&39

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.*

I used to think that Peter's mother in law was somewhat hard done by being expected to get back to the housework the moment she was cured of her fever. But that's the point isn't it? We want to be useful in life. We need to be needed. We all are needed and each one of us has a place in God's plan for the world, but we don't always recognise this. Other people are unappreciative of our efforts. Our children need us less as they grow older and more independent. The husband or wife we've cared for for years is promoted to glory. We feel useless. But we can all do something. We can pray. We can be a good friend to people. If we need care, we can make life easier for our carers. Set free from sin, we are free to serve God and to serve one another.

November 15th

Luke 4 v40

It is a pity that we have so few opportunities to sing the evening hymns. This one is based on the incident described in today's reading (in Mark's words) and is one of my favourites. I think it says all that want to say today.

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

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

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

4 And some have found the
world is vain,
yet from the world they break
not free;
and some have friends who give

them pain,
yet have not sought a friend in
thee;

5 And none, O Lord, have
perfect rest,
for none are wholly free from
sin;
and they who fain would serve
thee best
are conscious most of wrong
within.

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

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

November 16th

Luke 4 v41

It is one of the ironies of the Gospel that the demons recognise Jesus for Who He is immediately, whereas people fail to do so. The religious and political leaders regard Him as a threat to peace. The crowds fail to understand Him. Even the apostles keep getting Him wrong. We need to pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to understand.

November 18th

Luke 4 vv 42-44

It's unusual for clergy these days to stay in one parish as long as I have stayed here. There are good reasons for putting down roots in a community and becoming part of it. *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.* It is incarnational ministry. The vicar is one of us, getting to know us well and sharing the experience of living in this community. There are also reasons for moving on. The task which Jesus had to perform in those three years after His Baptism was to proclaim the Kingdom of God in as many places as possible. Paul, too, was an itinerant minister. He moved on when he had done what he had to do in any particular place. But he also appointed local ministers to continue to be pastors in the local Church. A change of minister brings fresh ideas, someone with a different set of talents to a Church. There may be a sense of career progression. A minister learns by his experiences in one parish and is better fitted therefore for serving in another Church or even as an archdeacon or a bishop. On the other hand, change can be unnecessarily unsettling for a community. Christian ministers should never be ambitious for themselves and for "promotion", only ambitious to serve Jesus to the best of their abilities.

November 19th

Luke 5 vv 1-11

Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

Peter's response to the miraculous draft of fishes is reminiscent of what Isaiah said (Chapter 6) when he *saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple*, and the six-winged seraphim cried, *Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.* As Peter would hundreds of years afterwards, the prophet responded, *Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.* The prophet and the fisherman experienced something of the awe which we all ought to feel in the presence of the holiness of God and our sense of our own unworthiness to be in His Presence. Both the prophet and the fisherman were commissioned to proclaim the Word of God. This they were able to do, because God set them free from sin. He cleansed them. He forgave them. He empowered them to serve Him. And so it is for us. Here is one of the prayers the old prayerbook provides for us to say after

receiving Holy Communion. It is a real loss to the Church that we no longer use these bible based prayers very often. **O LORD** and heavenly Father, we thy humble servants entirely desire thy fatherly goodness mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; most humbly beseeching thee to grant, that by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we and all thy whole Church may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion. And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee, that all we, who are partakers of this holy Communion, may be fulfilled with thy grace and heavenly benediction. And although we be unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service; not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences, through Jesus Christ our Lord; by whom, and with whom, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, all honour and glory be unto thee, O Father Almighty, world without end. *Amen.*

November 20th

Luke 5 vv 12-16

You've probably noticed that I derive a good deal of my understanding of the faith from the Book of Common Prayer and that I tend to favour the King James Version of the bible. One of the reasons for introducing new bible translations and for revising the Prayer Book was to make them more accessible to people. But in this we have failed. Of course I can't be sure that things would have been any better if we hadn't introduced more up to date services and biblical translations. The situation might have been even worse by now. But the fact remains that not so very long ago most people in this country were familiar with the principal bible stories and many knew bible texts by heart (in the KJV) Most people were also familiar with the prayers of the established Church even if they themselves worshipped in other denominations. This is no longer the case. I mention this because once everyone would have known that Jesus touched people who were called lepers and what that meant in terms of His reaching out in love to people regarded by others as untouchable, the courage He Himself showed in going against convention, and how His healing power made people clean – free to worship in the temple, free to take their proper place in society once again. The invitation is there for everybody who reads this, however degraded, to come to Christ for healing. He sets us an example in not turning anyone away, however troubled they may be.

November 21st (Last Sunday after Trinity)

Luke 5 vv 17-26

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.*
If they haven't already, our thoughts begin to turn towards Christmas today. We are on the cusp of the liturgical year. I remember one snowy day in Ramsgate preaching on this story for a children's service in a neighbouring church. I remember acting out the part of the paralysed man who, having been lowered through the roof, finds himself lying on the floor looking up at Jesus surrounded by an excited crowd and some very sceptical scribes and Pharisees. How did the man feel? When Jesus forgave his sins rather than curing his paralysis, do you think that he was disappointed? Or do you think that he was more concerned about his guilt for whatever sins he had committed than he was about being bedbound? Or might his paralysis have been a psychosomatic effect caused by his guilt? There is not a simple relationship between sin & suffering but there is a relationship. Jesus spoke with authority to forgive the man's sins. (On the Pharisees' premise that shows that He is God.) He backed up His words by deeds. He told the man to get up, pick up his bed and go home – which he did. We can be confident that Christ has the authority to forgive our sins. *He [Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ] pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel.* We're also involved in the healing ministry, caring for the sick, praying for them, serving in the medical and allied professions, and, sometimes, being the channels of grace which bring about the healing which is God's Will for those who are sick in body, mind or spirit.

November 22nd

Luke 5 vv 27-32

Levi (aka Matthew) celebrated the fact that Jesus had called him. Whatever other people thought of Levi, Jesus loved him as he was and had a place for him to do God's work on earth. Jesus loved Levi just as He was. He set him free from sin. He cleansed him. He commissioned him to work for God. So Levi held a celebration and invited all his old mates. He wanted his friends to join him in the party and, no doubt, he hoped that his friends would come to Jesus too – and in Him find their salvation. Our Lord's answer to the mean-spirited scribes & Pharisees is a warning to the Church to feel superior to no-one.

November 23rd

Luke 5 vv 33-39

Last week I mentioned that change can be unsettling in a Church. The new vicar is constantly compared to his predecessors. People keep harking back to the way we used to do things. Some people may leave the Church because they don't like change. That's not to say that change is always for the better or that the new vicar is necessarily better than the old. But sometimes we do have to accept that it is time to move on. The old methods no longer work. We might find the new guy difficult, but he is the one we've got to work with now. What we valued when we were younger doesn't appeal to young people today. The time has come for the minister we love to move on or even die. Perhaps we have become complacent in less than ideal ways and radical change is imperative. But a lot of people, especially it seems religious people, find change difficult. And Jesus is radically different. John the Baptist and his followers were doing a fine job. The temple worship was a good thing, ordained by God. No doubt many synagogues were the centres of their communities in the way parish churches can be today. It is quite understandable that people valued what they were already doing and didn't see the need to change, possibly felt threatened by it. But Jesus is radically different. Knowing Jesus transforms us. St Paul calls it metamorphosis. When we welcome Jesus into our lives, our homes, even our churches, it is like a tadpole turning into a frog or a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. We don't (if we are wise) throw the baby out with the bathwater. The frog and the butterfly incorporate what made the tadpole and the caterpillar, but they are re-ordered, added to, transformed. So Jesus says: *Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old* (Matthew 13⁵²).

November 24th

Luke 6 vv 1&2

Edwina Curry is Jewish and she was brought up in Liverpool. In her autobiography, she writes about the way Christians coming out of Sunday mass would buy their breakfast from Jewish bakers. The Jews were closed on Saturdays, their Sabbath. Everybody else (because England was supposedly a Christian nation) was closed on Sundays. What we do about the Sabbath is a tricky question. We can't sweep the

issue under the carpet. Observing the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. It is good that everyone has a rest from work at least one day a week. It is good for our family and social lives if we all have the same day off. A day on which we go to Church or Sunday School and make a special effort to read the Bible and pray is important for our religious health and growth. The decline in Sunday observance in this country has been in tandem with the decline in Christian faith. It can be a vicious circle. A person doesn't bother much about keeping Sunday because he's not very religious. Not going to Church, praying or reading the Bible, he drifts further from God and attends Church even less often. The children of the post-war generation which boasted *You can be a Christian without going to Church* hardly learned what it meant to be the Christians they still claimed to be and the majority of their children describe themselves as of no religion.

November 25th

Luke 6 vv 2-5

But Sabbath observance can become more of a penance than a blessing. Those who observe Sunday strictly may have a *holier than thou* attitude towards other people. Life would be difficult if essential services such as water and electricity were not maintained. Clearly, people like doctors and nurses need to work on the Sabbath. As Charles Dickens pointed out, there is not much point in giving labourers a day off on Sundays if all the places they might go to enjoy themselves are closed. And yet, if we are too liberal about opening up businesses and running services on Sundays, the Sabbath effectively ceased to be observed at all as has happened in England since the laws on Sunday trading were changed. [I once travelled home from Glasgow by rail on a Sunday, a journey made more difficult because there are fewer trains on Sundays.. Some men in the train from Scotland were complaining about this. If Sunday is to most people just an ordinary day, why shouldn't we be able to expect the normal weekday timetable? When I got to Gravesend, however, there were some other men lamenting the fact that everything is now open and Sunday is no longer special. I might add that the first group of men complaining about the Sabbath were also boasting about not paying their fares (which, with some justification, they considered unfair). Perhaps, breaking any of the Ten Commandments makes you more likely to break the others.]

November 26th

Luke 6 vv 6-11

Obviously, a doctor would treat an emergency on the Sabbath. But this wasn't an emergency. The man's hand had quite possibly have been withered for years. It wouldn't have hurt him to wait another day to be cured – unless, perhaps, Jesus would have left town by then. This has become relevant today because it is suggested that doctors' surgeries and hospitals ought to be open 7 days a week for routine consultations and procedures. Waiting lists are long. Expensive equipment is not being used when surgeries are closed. Modern people expect to be seen when it is convenient to them, just as they expect the shops to be open everyday and taxis to be available all night. But aren't all the people who work in the health service entitled to their days off, to be home from work when their children are off school, to go to Church if they want to? Isn't it reasonable to require non-urgent cases to present themselves at times which take account of the personal needs of health workers as well as the demands of patients?

November 27th

Luke 6 vv 12-16

Jesus prayed. On this occasion, He communed with His Father all night. Finding time for prayer is important to a healthy Christian life. God sent Jesus to save the world – a monumental undertaking. He chose twelve very fallible human beings to share His task, *whom he also named apostles*. Since that day, He has called many millions more of us very fallible human beings to work with Him to save the world. We are called Christians.

November 28th (Advent Sunday)

Luke 6 vv 17-19

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*

These miracles – healing, cleansing, life-giving – are foretastes of the coming Kingdom of God and signs of its coming. It is this for which we prepare on earth, repenting of our own sins, sharing the Good News, each playing our own part against sin, the world and the devil.

November 29th

Luke 6 vv 20-26

These are the values of the Kingdom of God. Don't they seem topsy turvy? Don't we want to be rich, well fed, the life and soul of the party, universally popular? Well maybe not millionaires, but comfortable; not dining on caviar and champagne every day, but not going hungry either; more cheerful than sad; having friends? Would that be so unreasonable? Perhaps the point is motivation. Do we devote our lives to the pursuit of personal gain? Do we enjoy showing off a more affluent lifestyle? Are we concerned only for our own happiness? Are we prepared to sacrifice our principles and our less-prepossessing friends on the altar of popularity? Or perhaps the point is justice. Selfish individuals might enjoy for now all the pleasures which this life has to offer while others live in squalor, but, one day, that will all be turned around (as in the story of Dives & Lazarus in Luke 16¹⁹⁼³¹). Or maybe the point is really that money, material goods and adulation cannot bring you true happiness or blessedness (same word in the Greek). The pagan philosopher Aristotle had worked this out centuries before and maintained that the only way to happiness was through virtue. What do we mean by virtue? What we Christians mean by virtue is living in the strength of God to act in accordance with His commandments – to love God & to love one another.

November 30th (S Andrew)

Luke 6 vv 27&29

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 thy holy commandments; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

This is my birthday. What do this collect and these verses mean to me? What do they mean to you? What is it to be called to follow Jesus (as all Christians are)? What does it mean *obediently to fulfil thy holy commandments*? Among other things it means to *Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you*. Becoming a Christian does require a radical transformation a metamorphosis from being a conventionally decent human being.

December 1st

Luke 6 vv 29&30

These are hard verses to interpret. What would happen if we took them literally? Would we get hit over and over again? Or would the aggressor lose interest when he found that we weren't prepared to fight back? Might he even learn the virtues of pacifism by our example? Do you teach your children to fight back if attacked by bullies in the playground? Should we support our country in embarking on a just war to defend ourselves (or maybe to defend oppressed people in some other country)?

If we naively gave people what ever they asked of us, might we find ourselves with nothing left? We might not be able to go out of doors at all without getting frostbite if we gave away our cloak and our coat. Would it be good for people to think that they could get what they wanted just by asking rather than by having to work for it? Would it be good for us, however, not to be too attached to our possessions and to put other people's needs before our own? One commentator asks whether it would be right to give an axe to a raving madman just because he asked you for it.

Jesus' teaching is very radical and takes a lot of thinking about, but it really cannot be ignored if we truly claim to be following Him.

December 2nd

Luke 6 v31

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.

This is known as the Golden Rule and is also found in religions other than Christianity and also in some non-religious systems of ethics. It's so obvious, isn't it? If we're looking for universal standards which apply everywhere and throughout history, this Golden Rule is an excellent place to start. It should apply in Afghanistan, Britain, China and Zimbabwe. It should apply in the 21st Century, the 1st Century and throughout history. It is a universal which is so obviously right that it ought to be accepted by everyone. So why don't we all live by the Golden Rule?

December 3rd

Luke 6 vv 32-36

We don't think much of people who ill treat their families or betray their friends' trust or turn away from people who have in the past been kind to them but are now in need of help. People who behave like that are obviously bad people. So does it follow that if you are kind to your family, treat your friends nicely and are always ready to return a favour, you are a god person? Well, yes you are, but not good enough. Jesus says that if we follow Him, we must behave as God behaves, loving people who don't love us, treating kindly those who mistreat us, and giving generously without any expectation of gratitude or reciprocity.

December 4th

Luke 6 v37

Judge not, and ye shall not be judged.

I've always taken this verse to me that we should not judge other or condemn them if we don't want God to condemn us. It is a similar thought to *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us*. We ought to treat other people as we hope that God will treat us. If we treat other people harshly, we invite God to treat us harshly. But it also occurs to me that too many of us are too afraid of other people judging us. What will people think of us? Do we look good enough? Are we smart enough? Are we having as good a time as they are? Some people seem to be really worried about what other people think of them. I wonder if that is at least partly because we're too judgmental of other people. Are we afraid of them judging us because we know how we judge them?

December 5th (Advent 2)

Luke 6 v38

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*

Traditionally today has been kept as Bible Sunday We receive the Word of God in the Scriptures. We receive so many other good things in our lives. We are called to be generous – freely sharing the Word, freely sharing all the good things God gives us. In sharing we are richly blessed. *Freely ye have received. Freely give.*

December 6th (S Nicholas)

Luke 6 v39

Can the blind lead the blind?

S Nicholas's Day is a special day for children. Nicholas was known for his kindness to children. In some countries, presents are exchanged on 6th December, rather than 25th. Being a parent is a big responsibility. Children need protection and guidance. Other people too are responsible for the welfare and guidance of others – teachers, politicians, etc.. Indeed, really we are all responsible for one another's well-being and for supporting and encouraging one another in choosing the correct paths in life. But how can we support and guide one another – children or adults – if we ourselves cannot see? In order to see ourselves and to lead others what we need is the Light of the World to follow.

December 7th (S Ambrose)

Luke 6 v40

S Ambrose, as well as being Bishop of Milan and a fine preacher and pastor, was a great musician. He is credited with a number of compositions which are still part of our worship today. One of these is the Te Deum. It begins with a wonderful paean of praise to God the Father, segueing into an affirmation of the Holy Trinity. It does our hearts good to praise God wholeheartedly. **WE** praise thee, O God : we acknowledge thee to be the Lord. All the earth doth worship thee : the Father everlasting. To thee all Angels cry aloud : the Heavens, and all the Powers therein. To thee Cherubin and Seraphin : continually do cry, Holy, Holy, Holy : Lord God of Sabaoth; Heaven and earth are full of the Majesty : of thy glory. The glorious company of the Apostles : praise thee. The goodly fellowship of the Prophets : praise thee. The noble army of Martyrs : praise thee. The holy Church throughout all the world : doth acknowledge thee; The Father : of an infinite Majesty; Thine honourable, true : and only Son; Also the Holy Ghost : the Comforter.

The second section of the Te Deum praises Jesus – glorious Son of God, equal in every respect to the Father & the Holy Spirit – Who yet became one of us and died a terrible, painful and humiliating death on our behalf. It is in this context that we understand what Jesus says about us, *The disciple is not above his master*. We share His humility; we share His glory. Thou art the King of Glory : O Christ. Thou art the everlasting Son : of the Father. When thou tookest upon thee to

deliver man : thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb. When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death : thou didst open the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. Thou sittest at the right hand of God : in the glory of the Father. We believe that thou shalt come : to be our Judge. We therefore pray thee, help thy servants : whom thou hast redeemed with thy precious blood. Make them to be numbered with thy Saints : in glory everlasting.

December 8th

Luke 6 vv 41&42

We were thinking about judgment a few days ago, our judging other people, God judging us, other people judging us. Being judged is unsettling. Who enjoys sitting an exam or undergoing an interview? The strange thing is that the strictest Judge of all is also the most merciful. The Judge Whom we might most fear is the One we do not have to fear because perfect love casts out all fear. None of us measures up to the standard which God sets us. We all deserve to be condemned. *There is none righteous, no not one*. We have every reason to be fearful of the Judgment of God, except that He is all merciful. If we repent and believe, our every sin is forgiven. All sins are washed away in the Blood of the Lamb. We are set free from sin. We don't have to be afraid. We don't need to condemn ourselves. The One Who is our ultimate Judge is infinitely merciful. Some people feel the need to affirm themselves, to be affirmed by other people, but we don't need to and we can't anyway. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. That is wonderfully liberating – to know that we don't have to justify ourselves. We are justified by God.

And then we come to judge others. The mote in our brother's eye is much more noticeable to us than the beam in our own eye. We're hypocrites if we judge other people. It's only as forgiven sinners that we can find the grace to assist other people to become better people – not feeling superior to them, or condemning them, but as fellow sinners seeking forgiveness from the same heavenly Father.

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed
for me

And that Thou bid'st me come
to thee
O Lamb of God, I come, I come

Just as I am, though tossed
about
With many a conflict, many a
doubt
Fightings and fears within
without
O Lamb of God, I come, I come
Just as I am, poor, wretched,
blind

Sight, riches, healing of the
mind
Yea, all I need, in Thee to find
O Lamb of God, I come, I come
Just as I am, Thou wilt receive
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse,
relieve
Because Thy promise I believe
O Lamb of God, I come, I come

December 9th

Luke 6 vv 43-45

Those of you who know me know that I tend to chafe under the yoke of regulation. It seems to me that most people, when told what they must or must not do by someone in authority, just get on with it. My natural inclination is to question. Why must I do this? Why must I not do that? Do you have the authority to compel me to do it? What can you do if I don't? Are you using your authority correctly? Do you yourself, important as you are, play by the same rules as you enforce on the rest of us? Should you have this authority? Actually, as Christians, we do have to accept authority. Romans 13 v1: *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.* I wouldn't say, however, that we have to obey authority without question. God is the highest authority and if human beings tell us to do something which would mean disobeying Him we must decline to do so and be prepared to take the consequences. Law has its place in ensuring that people behave well and perform their duty. Much more important than Law, however, is character. Law is for bad people, to place constraints on their wickedness. Law deters the thief from stealing and punishes him if he does steal. A good person, however, would not steal even if there were no law or no likelihood of being caught. Good people don't steal simply because they are good. This is called virtue ethics. We cultivate a good character in ourselves and in other people and we no longer behave ourselves because we are afraid of the consequences of misbehaving but simply because we are good people. Good character begins with turning to Christ. It is by His grace that we are forgiven our sins and set free to serve Him. The closer we grow to Him, the better people we become. Thus it is through His grace that we are enabled to be good people and therefore to behave as we should.

December 10th

Luke 6 vv 46-49

If we claim to follow Christ, we do as He says. If we live in accordance with His Will, we are unassailable. The last part of the Te Deum pleads for God's grace to enable us to live as He would have us live and therefore to be unassailable.

O Lord, save thy people : and bless thine heritage. Govern them : and lift them up for ever. Day by day : we magnify thee; And we worship thy Name : ever world without end. Vouchsafe, O Lord : to keep us this day without sin. O Lord, have mercy upon us : have mercy upon us. O Lord, let thy mercy lighten upon us : as our trust is in thee. O Lord, in thee have I trusted : let me never be confounded.

December 11th

Luke 7 vv 1-10

Traditionally, the Church of England has been more successful in the country than in the towns. This might be because we have had more churches and clergy per head of population in villages than in urban areas. It might be because we reacted too slowly to the rapid changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution 200 years ago. I suspect that there is also an innate conservatism about the Church of England which celebrates our *green and pleasant land* and really doesn't much like *those dark satanic mills*, and which would rather encourage *the rich man in his castle* to take responsibility for the welfare of *the poor man at his gate* than instigate revolutionary change in the social order.

However, many country churches are very small and financially struggling. And the Church of England does have a duty to reach those in the cities. This has led to be a bit of a spat within the C of E with some people concerned that there may be clergy redundancies and church closures in the country and the suburbs and investment in unproven non-parochial forms of ministry in the metropolitan areas. There's been a tension between what some bishops are hoping for – the growth of young & diverse urban churches - and the possible closure of smaller rural churches with predominantly older and mostly white congregations. Of course we need both. Jesus mainly worked in the country and among people of one race and Paul in cities where he established diverse multicultural churches. But they were both on the same mission. Here Jesus ministers to a gentile – someone of a different race and culture. Paul went to the Jew first & then the gentile.

December 12th (Advent 3)

Luke 7 vv 11-18

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.*

On the third Sunday of Advent, traditionally we think about John the Baptist – the one who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord. We are looking forward to celebrating His Birth at Christmas. We look forward to Christ's Presence in our hearts, homes and churches. We anticipate His coming again on the last day to judge both the quick and the dead. We pray that God enable His ministers to prepare us, the Church and the world, for that great and awful day.

December 13th

Luke 7 vv 19-23

Even John the Baptist, even rectors and vicars, have moments of weakness, doubts. Given what we expect of God, why aren't things working out as we would hope? People don't come to church or to the things we arrange in the belief that they will appeal to them. We don't get the answers which we think we ought to get to our prayers. There is so much trouble still in the world despite 2,000 years of Christian teaching. What's going on? Jesus tells John's disciples to tell him what they have seen and heard. The signs of the Kingdom are being fulfilled. It's a matter of how we look at things. Open our eyes to all the good things which God is doing in the world. Remember what He has done for us in the past, not nostalgically imagining that things used to be better than they are today, but regarding them as a sign of what can be and what will be in the world of today and tomorrow. God's Kingdom is coming. He is at work in the world today. He is working in the Church. He is working in our lives. Open your eyes.

December 14th

Luke 7 vv 24-30

John is the last and the greatest of the OT prophets. He ushers in the NT. He prepares the way for Jesus, Jesus Who fulfils all the promises and prophecies which have been revealed to us in Moses & the Prophets.

December 15th

Luke 7 vv 31-35

Advertising is a huge industry. It finances much of TV and the internet. In the form of sponsorship, it supports major sporting events and the arts. Tremendous thought goes into dreaming up campaigns which will persuade us to buy this or that product. Human behaviour is thoroughly analysed by the advertising industry to discover how we tick. There is the message and the medium – the means by which they hope to get the message across. A celebrity is shown wearing fashionable clothing. Scientists are called in to validate over the counter medicines, dentists to recommend toothpaste, cats to indicate which cat food they prefer. Different media are considered appropriate to encourage us to behave in certain ways. The Church herself is quite rightly always looking for fresh ways to proclaim the Gospel, new media to spread the word.

And yet there is also a certain suspicion about the authenticity of advertising. Does that celebrity really wear the sort of clothes you can buy on the High St? Are the medicines or toothpaste really as good as the adverts claim? Did that cat really freely choose that cat food on the first take? For what ever reason, we get wise to advertising. We fast forward the adverts on TV if we can. We are not easily persuaded to buy things we wouldn't buy anyway. I don't waste time looking at the romances in the book shop.

John & Jesus were very different. They both told people to be ready for the Kingdom of God, but those people who were just not interested paid no attention either to the desert prophet dressed in camel hair or to the warm hearted Teacher and Healer Who was such good company. Only too often people prefer the false prophet, the inauthentic teacher, the snake oil salesman to the true prophet of God.

Jesus is the Word. The medium is the message. The message is authentic. What He preaches is what He is. It follows that the same should be true of Christians – that we practise what we preach, that we are what we preach, that we are authentic. We might be more like John or more like Jesus in the way we present. What most matters is that we are authentic. People may ignore us or choose to ignore the message, but unless we are authentic they cannot choose fairly.

December 16th

Luke 7 vv 36-39

For us who know the story, it is very easy to condemn Simon the Pharisee for his attitude to the woman who wept over Jesus' feet, dried them with her hair & anointed them. But how would you or I react in similar circumstances? We sit down to have a nice dinner with our family & friends, perhaps with honoured guests, & a woman of very doubtful reputation barges into the party & makes an exhibition of herself. Or a manifestly troubled person enters the railway carriage in which we are travelling or noisily comes into church while the service is going on. If the person seems to be dangerous, we have to consider the need to protect ourselves & other people. If we are engaged in taking an important journey or conducting a service for a number of people, in what circumstances is it right to allow one person to disrupt what we are doing perhaps for the benefit of others? I'm not saying that I know the answers to these questions, but the real question is do we treat this embarrassing (or even dangerous person) as a fellow human being, a child of God?

December 17th

Luke 7 vv 40-50

Well! It's the respectable gentleman, the pious religious man, the one who actually invited Jesus into his house, who finds himself the subject of our Lord's censure. This difficult woman with all her problems is the one who is commended & blessed by Jesus. We can imagine the sort of life she might have had. Perhaps she was driven by poverty onto the streets & could only get a living by prostitution. Maybe she made some foolish mistakes when she was younger. Perhaps she did do something very bad from which she could find no way back. Or was she just unlucky? Perhaps her husband or her betrothed died & left her unsupported. Whatever the reason she found herself on the streets, she was caught in a vicious circle. Respectable people didn't want to know her. Nobody would give her a chance. She might become sick. Very probably she would have illegitimate babies to care for. As her charms faded with hardship & age, even this way of earning a living would gradually slip away from her. She had nothing. She knew she had nothing. She recognised her own failure & failings. And she came to Jesus. He could & did give her a fresh start. Simon didn't know that he too needed to be forgiven. He therefore lacked compassion & earned censure.

December 18th

Luke 8 vv 1-3

1 Thou didst leave Thy throne
and Thy kingly crown,
When Thou camest to earth for
me;
But in Bethlehem's home was
there found no room
For Thy holy nativity.
O come to my heart, Lord
Jesus,
There is room in my heart for
Thee.

2 Heaven's arches rang when
the angels sang,
Proclaiming Thy royal degree;
But of lowly birth didst Thou
come to earth,

And in great humility.
O come to my heart, Lord
Jesus,
There is room in my heart for
Thee.

3 The foxes found rest, and the
birds their nest
In the shade of the forest tree;
But Thy couch was the sod, O
Thou Son of God,
In the deserts of Galilee.
O come to my heart, Lord
Jesus,
There is room in my heart for
Thee.

One week to Christmas, when we think of Jesus born as one of us. He gave up everything for us in Heaven and it would appear that He adopted a humble lifestyle on earth. As a young man, He worked as a carpenter. But how did He support Himself in the three years of His ministry – verse 3 of the hymn? Today's reading give us some idea.

December 19th (Advent 4)

Luke 8 vv 4-15

The seed is the word of God.

Jesus preaches the Word. He is the Word. Jesus is the medium and the message. The Word comes to us in so many ways. How do we receive God's Word? If our hearts are open, the Word takes root and grows in our heart. We are filled with His love. We become fruitful in doing His work, in the world, sharing the Word in acts of love.

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 20th

Luke 8 vv 16&17

There are two ways of looking at these verses. If we are Christians, this ought to be manifest in our lives. We should not be ashamed to confess Jesus and to be known as members of His Church. We don't boast about our righteousness. Such righteousness as we have is the gift of God to us, but neither are we ashamed of Him in the world.

If we are tempted to sin. These verses remind us that the truth always comes out. We shan't get away with things.

4 Thou camest, O Lord, with
the living word
That should set Thy people
free;
But with mocking scorn, and
with crown of thorn,

They bore Thee to Calvary.
O come to my heart, Lord
Jesus,
There is room in my heart for
Thee.

December 21st (S Thomas)

Luke 8 v18

Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.

This is quite a difficult verse. I think it means that those who have welcomed and received the Word of God will receive more. The seed sown in our hearts grows and produces more fruit. But, if our hearts are hardened against the Word, even though we might appear to others to be religious, we shall lose what we seem to have had.

Thomas doubted, but He was open to Jesus. He remained part of the company of the faithful. He continued to meet with the apostles. He was open to what Jesus showed him. He was a partaker of the Resurrection with those who witnessed, as are the millions who have believed without seeing.

5 When the heavens shall ring,
and the angels sing,
At Thy coming to victory,
Let Thy voice call me home,
saying "Yet there is room,
There is room at My side for

thee."
My heart shall rejoice, Lord
Jesus,
When Thou comest and callest
for me

December 22nd

Luke 8 vv 19-21

It is difficult for families when grown up children have their own lives to lead and become unavailable at least part of the time to kith and kin. There is a question of priorities when a young person marries, moves away from home, goes to college, takes a job. The Bible is clear about the first one. Wives take precedence over parents, though one hopes that there won't be too much conflict between the interests of one's spouse on the one hand and one's mum and dad on the other. The other examples are harder. How important is the job or college course? Can the family manage if the young person in question goes away? Whose needs should take precedence? Jesus had a definite mission and, at this time, He was not available to Mary & His brothers. That might have been painful for them. The incident did, however, provide Him with the opportunity to teach that all those of us who hear the word of God and do it are His family. **ALMIGHTY** and everliving God, who for the more confirmation of the faith didst suffer thy holy Apostle Thomas to be doubtful in thy Son's resurrection; Grant us so perfectly, and without all doubt, to believe in thy Son Jesus Christ, that our faith in thy sight may never be reprov'd. Hear us, O Lord, through the same Jesus Christ, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, now and for evermore. *Amen.*

December 23rd

Luke 8 vv 22-25

We all encounter storms in our lives. Everything seems to be calm. We set off and the wind and waves rise and we feel helpless and afraid. We can't manage on our own. Now, we know that Jesus is with us on our journey. He is in the same boat. That's what Christmas is about. But there might be times when He seems to be asleep. We may not feel conscious of His living Presence in our lives. Our prayers seem to be unanswered. The storm is getting worse. Our boat feels as if it is going to sink. According to Mark, the apostles said at this juncture, *Carest thou not that we perish?* Well He does care. *Where is your faith?* He asks them. He cares for us too and we can trust Him. His power is unlimited. *What manner of man is this! for he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him.* The apostles are fearful, perplexed, overawed at the thought of Who Jesus is and what He can do. We may be perplexed and afraid, but we can be sure that Jesus is looking after us.

December 24th (Christmas Eve)

Luke 8 vv 26-40

However we understand what was wrong with this man – demon possession, illness – we must surely feel a tremendous compassion for him. So we must for all people who suffer in these kinds of ways – terrible mental stress sometimes leading to dreadful physical manifestations. We are also aware that the treatment received by people who are mentally ill and those who have been believed to be possessed by demons has only too often been cruel and added to their sufferings. This verse from a well loved carol celebrates what Jesus comes to bring to all humanity – including those who are sick in mind, body or spirit. As His followers, it falls on us too to bring peace, healing, light & life to all the sons of earth, all humanity.

Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace!

Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings.

Mild He lays His glory by,

Born that man no more may die.

Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!”

December 25th (Christmas Day)

Luke 8 vv 41&42

There is a very sad entry in one of those diaries kept and published by a Victorian clergyman. It describes the death and burial of a small child on Christmas Day. The loss of a child is one of the worst things that can happen to you. It is understandable that Jairus was so troubled and begged Jesus to come and help him. We might reflect that many families and individuals will be going through tough times this Christmas Day. Perhaps there is something we can do to help them. We can all pray. Maybe Christmas is a tough time for us ourselves. Where can we find help? Above the font in Cuxton Church is a stained glass window commemorating a child who died young. He had been baptised in that font. He was and is a child of God, albeit one who was taken home earlier than his family would have wanted. We know where we can find hope – in the Birth of the Holy Child Who is born today.

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)

Luke 8 vv 43-48

This poor woman knew where she could find hope. She had faith in Jesus and her faith made her whole.

The healing of his seamless dress

we touch him in life's throng
and press,

is by our beds of pain;

and we are whole again.

Some of these hymns have such wonderful words which can mean so much to us.

Stephen, facing martyrdom, looked to Jesus and not only found comfort and encourage to face up to what was coming but also the grace to follow his Master's example and to pray for his tormenters.

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.*

December 27th (S John the Evangelist)

Luke 8 vv 49-56

Jairus' friends believed that the situation was hopeless. There was nothing more which could be done. It was pointless to trouble Jesus any further. But, things are never hopeless. (I Corinthians 13¹³) *And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity...* (Romans 5) ¹*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: ²By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;⁴ And patience, experience; and experience, hope: ⁵And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.*

Jesus takes John and his brother James & the girl's parents and returns her to them. Never give up hope for this world or the world to come.

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

December 28th (Holy Innocents)

Luke 9 vv 1-6

These verses have made some Christians reckless. They have embarked on what they believe to have been good projects, God's work even, and have made no proper preparation, relying on the Lord to provide. Then maybe it has turned out that they were mistaken about the project or that, yes it was a good project, but that the way the Lord intended to provide for them was for them to make proper plans, raise funds, take the necessary training, acquire the goods and services they needed to make the project successful, etc.. Such Christians may get themselves and the Church into serious trouble – debt, reputational damage, letting down people whose expectations have been unfairly raised.

On the other hand, there are Christians who are too timid. Far from trusting the Lord to provide, they won't attempt anything until they are absolutely sure that they have the resources to cover every eventuality. They don't have faith that God is calling them to undertake some particular kind of service or that He will provide the means by which to carry it out. Such Christians and Churches can only stagnate. Afraid to reach out to the future, they die in the present.

The wise men evidently set out in faith but not knowing exactly where they were going. They went to Jerusalem first instead of Bethlehem. They did, however, heed the sign of the star. They followed the guidance of Herod's bible scholars. They remembered to take their gifts. Presumably, they made adequate provision for their journey.

So what do we need if we are to be brave and faithful enough to trust God and follow where He is leading but not to be reckless and foolish? Surely, the answer is wisdom.

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

Luke 9 vv 7-9

This is the anniversary of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket in 1170. The justice of his cause is rather less obvious than that of John the Baptist, but he stood up for what he believed and paid the price. Christians of various persuasions have faced martyrdom, sometimes at the hands of their fellow Christians. People are prepared to die for other faiths too and for political and other causes. We respect people who are prepared to lay down their lives even in causes we don't agree with. We defend freedom of expression. We abhor oppression and persecution. So again we pray for wisdom – to know what is right, to know how to stand up for what is right, to know how to stand up for the rights of people whom we believe to be wrong.

December 30th

Luke 9 vv 10-17

At this time of year, our problem is more likely to be having too much food rather than too little. What can we do with all the leftovers? But there are people who are hungry. At other times, some of us may find it a stretch to make ends meet. But, if we're generous as God is generous, we find we don't go short. Ecclesiastes 11¹: *Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.*

December 31st

Luke 9 vv 18-27

What a passage on which to finish the year! Who is Jesus? He is the Christ of God. What will happen to Him? He will suffer and die for the sins of the world. What does that mean for His followers? We must take up our cross daily and follow Him. What is the end of our life? We shall see the Kingdom of God.