

# The Gospel According to St Luke (continued)

Bible Notes  
January - March  
2022

January 1<sup>st</sup> (Circumcision & Naming of Jesus) Luke 9 vv 28-32

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

The story of the Transfiguration has a spot in my heart. In the Summer of 1975, when I was trying to decide whether I thought that God was calling me to be a priest, I attended Bredhurst Church on the Feast of the Transfiguration (6<sup>th</sup> August) & it so happened that the vicar preached a sermon regarding his own calling. The apostles had a vision of Christ in His glory. So did S Paul on the Road to Damascus. Isaiah and Elijah had glorious visions of God when they were called to be prophets. But, when Peter & Andrew & James & John were originally called, they were just going about their business as fishermen. Matthew was working as a tax collector when Jesus called him to follow in the Way. God can call absolutely anyone, absolutely anywhere, whatever they may be doing at the time. Nevertheless, it is good to cultivate the sense that we are always in the Presence of the Glory of God and to be attentive to His Voice. You never know what He is calling you to do, whoever you are.

January 2<sup>nd</sup> (Christmas 1) Luke 9 vv 33 & 34

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

How would you or I react if we suddenly experienced what Peter & the other two apostles experienced? Even Mary had to be told by the angel, *Fear not!* We would certainly be awed, very likely afraid. St Paul says that it would not be lawful to speak of what was seen in a vision of heaven. Ezekiel is extremely circumspect regarding what he himself was shown of God. Ezekiel 1: <sup>26</sup> *And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it.* <sup>27</sup> *And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it,*

from the appearance of his loins even upward, and from the appearance of his loins even downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about.<sup>28</sup> As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake. How would we react to such a vision of God? I often think actually that we have too much lost our sense of mystery and awe, of fear even, in the Presence of God. Christ is Present in our fellowship for worship, in the Bread & Wine of Holy Communion, in His Word written in the Holy Bible. *Perfect love casteth out fear*, but it does not substitute awe for irreverence or indifference.

January 3<sup>rd</sup>

Luke 9 v35

*This is my beloved Son. Hear him.*

Here's the appropriate response to our awareness of God's Presence. Hear Him. To hear His Word in biblical language is to act on it. Our experience of the Glory of God wherever that may be (in Church, in Nature, in friendships and family, wherever) inspires us to become more Christ-like generally and, on occasion, specifically to undertake a particular task or to make changes in the way we live.

January 4<sup>th</sup>

Luke 9 v36

*Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

One of our most important tasks as Christians is to share the Good News, to tell people about the Glory of God, of His Love for us, His Judgment & Mercy, what He requires of us and what we can expect of Him. *For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.* Yet there are places in the Gospel where people who have been healed by Christ have been told to say nothing. There are places like this where the whole truth is not yet to be disclosed. We can wonder why. In the case of not saying too much about the healing miracles, it may be because the crowds coming to be healed were already so large that Jesus was hardly able to address them. It may also have been so as not to alienate the authorities too soon. Maybe the people were just not ready to receive the glory revealed in the Transfiguration. Even more glorious than this is His Death on the Cross – perfect Love tried to the utmost and overcoming all the powers of evil. Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus of this at the Transfiguration.

January 5<sup>th</sup>

Luke 9 vv 37-40

I find this story very difficult. I remember when I taught in Sunday School fifty years ago a bright pupil saying that what was wrong with the boy sounded like epilepsy. And so it does, and yet Jesus treats it as demon possession.

We're all aware that terrible damage has been done to people because Christians have blamed illness on possession. Physical illnesses have been blamed on demon possession. So have mental illnesses even more so. Epilepsy is in fact a physical illness but a lot of people wrongly think of it as a mental illness.

Where illness of whatever kind has been blamed on demon possession, some people have practised what they consider to be rituals of exorcism which are downright cruel. Because they are cruel and not of love in any honest sense of that word, they are not of God. Where Christians have blamed sickness or misfortune of any kind on demons, there has been a tendency to blame the person suffering. It is suggested that they must have done something very bad to let the demons in or that they must now lack faith because they don't get better.

All this is very wrong. Yet I can't do what too many Christians do these days and simply discount the bible stories they don't agree with. It's too easy to say that the people who wrote the bible were "primitive" people who lacked the insights and education that we have had and that therefore they got things wrong and we know better. Some people even say that Jesus was a man of His time and that, quite simply, we know better than He did about a whole lot of things. There is a terrible price to paid, however, if we discount the Bible as the written Word of God and Jesus as God's Word made flesh. By what authority do we believe what we believe if we can't trust the Bible or even Jesus?

We've got to wrestle with this. Epilepsy and other illnesses are to be treated with kindness and with all the resources of modern medicine. Yet the devil & demons do exist. There is evil in the world. Sickness is not a good thing. Evil has to be confronted and overcome by faith & hope & love.

January 6<sup>th</sup> (Epiphany)

Luke 9 vv 41&42

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

We think of the Epiphany story as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Gentiles means *Nations*. It's the manifestation of Christ to the whole world. God is not only the God of Israel. The miracles which Jesus performs are signs of Who He is and what He stands for. He is *the power and wisdom of God*. He makes us whole. He cleanses us. He forgives us. He heals us. He meets all our needs. He overcomes all the power of the Evil One and this is manifest in the exorcisms which He performs.

January 7<sup>th</sup>

Luke 9 vv 43-45

Jesus overcomes all the power of the Evil One. He has authority on earth to forgive sins. Even the demons obey Him. He deals with disease. He makes whole. How can this be? He is the Son of man Who is delivered into the hands of men to suffer & die for the sins of the whole world.

Manifest in making whole  
Palsied limbs and fainting soul;  
Manifest in valiant fight,  
Quelling all the devil's might;

Manifest in gracious will,  
Ever bringing good from ill;  
Anthems be to thee address,  
God in man made manifest.

January 8<sup>th</sup>

Luke 9 vv 46-48

Children are a big part of many people's Christmases. We love to see the nativity plays. We enjoy the pleasure children get from receiving presents. Even we old people might join in their childish games if only at Christmas. On the other hand, there can be an unseemly greed around the table or when opening parcels. Games can become overly competitive. There is a certain amount of selfishness. There may well be tears before bedtime. So what is it about children that Jesus said that we must be like them in order to receive the Kingdom of God and that to receive a child is to receive Jesus and to receive Jesus is to receive God? Humility, vulnerability, love, trust, simplicity, joy, faith, hope, irrepressibility ? What do you think?

January 9<sup>th</sup> (Epiphany 1, Baptism of Christ)

Luke 9 vv 49&50

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

If you are a traditional Anglican using the Book of Common Prayer, today's Gospel is about Jesus going up to Jerusalem when He was twelve – the only story we have in the Bible between His infancy and His manhood. If you attend a Church like ours which uses Common Worship or if you are a Roman Catholic, you will be celebrating today Christ's Baptism. I'm not sure how the Orthodox calendar meshes with ours at this point. It's complicated by the fact that many Orthodox use the Julian calendar, while we use the Gregorian. Many Protestant Churches won't be following a fixed pattern at all and will have chosen their own bible readings for this Sunday in accordance with what they believe to be God's choice for the edification of their fellowships. Small differences and yet they reflect much bigger divisions within God's Church – different emphases, different doctrines, different forms of worship, different ideas about how we evangelise the world and care for its material needs. We all believe pretty much that we are right. Some of us may wonder even if some of the others are Christians at all. Do we receive Communion with them? Do they accept the validity of our Baptisms? Do we find their services boring or incomprehensible? Or too happy clappy? Do they think that we are too stuffy or maybe that we lack reverence? Are we surprised when we go to a Church of another denomination and find that its services are very much like our own? Should there be women ministers? Should there be ministers at all distinct from the rest of believers who all together make up Christ's royal priesthood? Do ministers have to be ordained by a bishop? Does welfare work like giving to foodbanks follow naturally from being part of a worshipping community or is it a distraction from the real work of proclaiming the Gospel? Do biblical & traditional rules about gender and sex apply in the modern world? Or not? We have sincere & good reasons for holding different views on so many matters and for not uniting in one Church & yet Jesus prayed that we should be one. Essentially we are one because we're all the Body of Christ & He is one.

January 10<sup>th</sup>

Luke 9 vv 51-56

Verse 55: *But he turned and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.*

Does not occur in its entirety in what are considered to be the best manuscripts and so it gets left out of many modern editions of the Bible. Which is a pity, because whether or not Jesus actually said these words, they are the essence of what this passage is about. If we follow Jesus, our calling is to behave like Jesus, which, among other things, means that we do not curse other people – even if we think they are disrespecting Jesus.

January 11<sup>th</sup>

Luke 9 vv 57&58

This man is full of enthusiasm, but he hasn't thought through what it means to follow Jesus. Without Jesus we are incomplete as human beings, we can never be satisfied, we do not enjoy life in all its fulness. On the other hand, to follow Jesus means to yield our lives to Him, to offer Him everything that we are, as He has given Himself for us.

The foxes found rest, and the  
bird had its nest  
In the shade of the cedar tree;  
But thy couch was the sod, O  
thou Son of God,

In the desert of Galilee:  
O come to my heart, Lord  
Jesus;  
There is room in my heart for  
thee.

January 11<sup>th</sup>

Luke 9 vv 59&60

We instinctively rebel against what Jesus says here. We might read it as if the man were on the way to his father's funeral when Jesus called him. Then what Jesus said would seem very harsh and perhaps disrespectful, though one might argue that we have no right to expect the respect of the Son of God. God is no respecter of persons! More likely, the man just means that his father is old and perhaps dependent on him and that therefore he cannot follow Jesus until the old man dies. Jesus isn't having it. There's a job to be done. The time is now. The man's salvation depends on following Jesus. The world needs what only Jesus and His disciples have to offer – the Word of God. When he was Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie worried about the number of men offering to be ordained only after they had retired from a more lucrative position. There may be all sorts of reasons why we feel we ought to put off following Jesus, but they are never good enough.

January 12<sup>th</sup>

Luke 9 vv 61&62

At the end of I Kings 19, the prophet Elijah summons Elisha, who is out in the fields ploughing, to join Elijah with a view to taking his place as prophet of Israel. Elisha, with Elijah's blessing, first goes home to bid farewell to his parents. He sacrifices the oxen and makes a fire of the yoke to cook the meat and feeds the household with it. He is quite definitely leaving his old life behind to do God's work in a new way. Jesus here seems to be demanding of this man even more than Elijah asked of Elisha. Because the task is more urgent? Because the Word of God spoken by Jesus is even more important than the Word of God proclaimed by Elijah? Or perhaps Jesus is stricter than Elijah because He discerns that, unlike Elisha, this man's heart isn't really in it?

Anyway, the Bible values family life very highly. So does Jesus. Normally our most important duties are to honour our parents, to care for our children, to look after our relatives and to cleave to our spouses for better or worse till death us do part. Reciprocally, we look to our families first to look after us. But there are occasions when a family may try to separate us from our faith. There are occasions when we are called to such an important work for God that we have to entrust the care of our families to others.

There is a book called *The Weirdness of the West* by Joe Henrich which claims that westerners like us are much more individualistic and less bound to kith and kin than people are in most other human cultures. He suggests that this is part a result of our Christian heritage. We have been taught by Jesus that there are some loyalties which transcend even the bonds of family, tribe and nation. Make of that what you will, but to me it explains a lot.

January 13<sup>th</sup>

Luke 10 vv 1&2

These words of Jesus are sometimes quoted on the Ember Days, when we especially ask God to call people to serve Him as ordained ministers in His Church and to pray for those who are preparing for ordination. This praying for labourers to bring in God's Harvest is an important ministry in which we share, but without forgetting that, not only the ordained, but all the baptised are called to do God's work. PTO.

**ALMIGHTY** God, the giver of all good gifts, who of thy divine providence hast appointed divers Orders in thy Church; Give thy grace, we humbly beseech thee, to all those who are to be called to any office and administration in the same; and so replenish them with the truth of thy doctrine, and endue them with innocency of life, that they may faithfully serve before thee, to the glory of thy great Name, and the benefit of thy holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

January 14<sup>th</sup>

Luke 10 v3

*Lambs among wolves.*

It isn't always easy to serve Christ faithfully. Very often there is opposition. Sometimes there is persecution. We ought to think about those who are actively persecuted for their faithfulness to Christ and to pray for them. We may also be able to contact them or intercede for them with their own governments or to ask our government to intervene on their behalf. You can find Christian organisations which support persecuted Christians on the internet. We ought too to think about people who are trying to be faithful Christians in our own increasingly secular culture with all its pressures to conform to a materialistic lifestyle. We have to be careful ourselves not to compromise the essentials of our faith in order to "fit in" in contemporary society.

That it may please thee to have mercy upon all men;

*We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.*

That it may please thee to forgive our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers, and to turn their hearts;

*We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.*

January 15<sup>th</sup>

Luke 10 v4

We hear a lot about the Church lacking resources. There are too few clergy to provide a vicar in every parish. If there were more clergy, there wouldn't be enough money to pay them adequately. So individual churches close, parishes are merged and schemes are drawn up to centralise the organisation of the Church of England. But why should this be so? God's resources are infinite. There have been churches in Cuxton and Halling for nearly a millennium and a half. How did it happen that, for the last almost fifty years, they have had to share a rector? How come that it is possible that when my time is over these two churches may be forced into a larger grouping or even closed? God's resources are infinite. Is it that we are misusing them?

January 16<sup>th</sup> (Epiphany 2)

Luke 10 vv 5-9

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

These seventy (or 72) are not vicars who stay in one place, but travelling missionaries. The expectation is that they will be supported by the communities to which they minister. They expect hospitality. They are to accept graciously whatever they are offered. The early Church as it expanded after our Lord's Ascension worked on much the same principles. The Church supported the ministers – though the greatest of them all, St Paul – supported himself by carrying on his trade as a tent maker. In time, it all became more organised. Tithes and other offerings became mandatory. There were endowments and fees for certain services. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, these were nationalised and the clergy stipend became much more like a salary paid out of central funds. In comparison with most people, Church of England clergy are quite well paid. In comparison with the professionals with whom the Church likes to compare us, we are not paid all that well.

So, is the model wrong? Should we be spending money on church buildings and parsonages? Should clergy be relying for support on the voluntary contributions of their flocks or supporting themselves by having a paid job as well as being preachers and pastors? Should we move on rapidly from community to community rather than staying in one place? Do we need national & diocesan management structures?

Many people would say that times have changed, that we are in a very different situation from that in which the Gospel was first preached. We are supposed to be a Christian country. We do need pastors who stay around to look after us. We ought to have places of worship which are themselves an offering of praise to God and reflect His Glory in their architecture. Our ministers ought not to have to worry about issues such as money and housing. This has been the model in this country for more than 1,000 years. If it is God's Will that we should continue in this way, the resources will be available, but Christians will have to give more generously of their time, talents and money if so.

January 17<sup>th</sup>

Luke 10 vv 10-16

So, what about this? Give up on individuals and communities which refuse to hear the Gospel? Is the Church of England right to close churches and withdraw clergy from places where there are insufficient people interested to maintain a Christian presence? At what point do we acknowledge that we are wasting our time and risking our own personal well-being by casting our pearls before swine? Such an attitude seems to be contrary to the Gospel. *God so loved the world.* He doesn't give up on anyone. He doesn't desire the death of a sinner. In fact we are all sinners and Christ died for us when we were still sinners. *Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.* Yet Jesus tells these missionaries to move on from where they are rejected, shaking the dust off their feet. What is going on here? I think there are two lessons here for us. One is that it is possible for people to reject the Word of God. If they do, they reject Jesus Himself and God Himself. There are terrible consequences to this ultimate rejection of God but God respects our freedom to reject Him if that is our determination. More pragmatically, there were just three years in which Jesus and His disciples had to preach the Word to the people of Israel. There was no time to waste on those who just weren't interested. Fifty years ago, when parishes were first being grouped in a big way because of a shortage of clergy, a letter in the *Church Times* asked how one priest could realistically minister to a large number of churches. They would all suffer and decline because none of them would have adequate pastoral care. One answer in a later edition was to close most of the unviable churches and to concentrate the rector's efforts on making one Church in the group flourish. Is this the answer? I don't think it would be if we only had more faith as a Church and as a nation.

January 18<sup>th</sup> (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity) Luke 10 vv 17-20

The seventy achieved great things. Jesus gave them great powers. But their real cause for rejoicing was that their names were written in heaven – as are the names of all Christians. Hence we are one and it is our duty to pray for our unity to be made manifest in our love for one another. *Remember, Lord, your Church in every land. Reveal her unity, guard her faith and preserve her in peace.*

January 19<sup>th</sup>

Luke 10 vv 21&22

I preached recently on joy. There is the joy of the person who comes to the knowledge of God, the repentant sinner who becomes an heir of eternal life. There is the joy of the Church in receiving the lost sheep back into the fold, the lost son back into the bosom of the Christian family. And there is the joy in heaven over every single sinner who repents, every single child of God who acknowledges his or her heavenly Father. The unity of the Church, our love for one another, springs from our unity with Christ in His love for us and our love for Him, and the love of the Holy Trinity in which the three persons of the Godhead are one in the love which is the nature of God.

January 20<sup>th</sup>

Luke 10 vv 23&24

It's that sense of privilege. We know God. We call God Father. Our names are known to Him. Christ died for each one of us. We have His Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts. We have eternal life in Him. He makes our joy complete.

Were the whole realm of nature  
mine,  
That were an offering far too  
small;

Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my  
all.

January 21<sup>st</sup>

Luke 10 vv 25-29

The lawyer was testing Jesus, tempting Him if you like, but not necessarily in a bad way. Maybe he just wanted to know more about Jesus. Maybe it was even a little bit of lawyerly teasing. Perhaps he was deeply serious or possibly half-joking, half really wanting to know. The lawyer would not have been at all surprised that Jesus summed up the Law in the commands to love God and neighbour. Many rabbis did the same. It's clear that we have to love God. The tricky bit is working out who our neighbours are and how we are supposed to love them. Was the Jew's neighbour his fellow Jew? Are our neighbours our Christian brothers and sisters? Are they the people who live in our community? Are our neighbours only good people like us or are they everybody we encounter? Could people we never meet, our fellow Christians, our fellow human beings anywhere in the world be our neighbours? Just how far do we have to go in loving them? Do we have to share with them what is really ours & we want to keep for ourselves?

January 22<sup>nd</sup>

Luke 10 vv 30&31

Why might we pass by on the other side if we saw someone in trouble? If the person was a crime victim, we might fear that the criminals were still around. Or we might think that the victim could be a gang member too & be afraid to get mixed up in what might be a violent & a complex situation. We might be afraid that if we were the only one around when the police came we'd be a suspect or get caught up in lengthy investigations and perhaps have to give evidence in open court. We might just be in too much of a hurry to stop and lend a hand. Or we would feel embarrassed to get involved. Or we might assume that helping out was somebody else's responsibility. We're much more likely to stop and offer help if there aren't many people about than if there's a crowd and we can hope that someone else will do something. The priest and the Levite in this story might have been on their way to serve in the Temple and afraid to make themselves ritually unclean by touching what might turn out to be a dead body. In these times of COVID, would we think twice about helping somebody who was gasping for breath? You'd have to weigh up all these considerations and others like them in the light of the commandment *Love thy neighbour as thyself*.

January 23<sup>rd</sup> (Epiphany 3)

Luke 10 vv 33&34

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

The moral usually drawn from this story is that we should act lovingly towards people whom we might be tempted to dislike. Jews and Samaritans generally disliked one another (for historical and theological reasons as is so often the case in conflicts between human communities) and Jesus therefore told the Jewish lawyer that, if he loved his neighbour as himself, he would care for a Samaritan who had got into trouble. But there is a twist to the story. It is the Samaritan who helps the Jew. Yes, the member of one community comes to the aid of a member of another community which he might have been expected to despise, but it is more than that. The Jews, especially Jewish lawyers, thought that the Law was their special possession. They knew it better than anyone else. But it was the Samaritan in the story, not the Jew,

who kept the Law's command. The priest and the Levite probably read the Law far more often than the Samaritan traveller. They may have known much of it by heart. But it was the Samaritan who acted on it. I'm reminded of Romans 2: <sup>13</sup> *(For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. <sup>14</sup> For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves. <sup>15</sup> Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;)* Yes, our neighbour could be any human being whom we are in a position to help, but it is not in reciting the words *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself* that we please God. It is in actually loving him and acting on that love.

January 24<sup>th</sup>

Luke 10 v35

*Who Pays the Innkeeper?* was a question raised at the time of the Thatcher government. A lot of Christians thought that Mrs Thatcher's government in pursuing policies designed to make the economy more efficient did so with an unnecessary ruthlessness and sometimes actual cruelty. Failing industries such as coal-mining and steel were allowed to fail or even deliberately put out of their misery. There were millions of unemployed people and formerly prosperous industrial and commercial towns became derelict. It felt as if the government's policies were the very opposite of *Love your neighbour*.

On the other hand, Thatcher's defenders argued, the innkeeper has to be paid. You can't help the poor and the sick unless you have the wherewithal to do so. If you allow the country to become impoverished by producing goods for which there is no longer a market or paying people to do jobs which are not needed, you run out of the money you need to do what does need doing. You have to be reasonably efficient if you are to remain solvent.

So, there has to be a balance between the need to generate profit and the demands of compassion (and, indeed, environmental sustainability). How does society juggle with all these balls without dropping any of them? We do need to pray for those who have power & responsibility.

January 25<sup>th</sup> (Conversion of St Paul)

Luke 10 vv 36&37

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

What difference did Paul make? He was an effective preacher who proclaimed the Gospel and established churches around the Eastern Mediterranean. His letters make up a very large proportion of the New Testament. I wonder what Christianity would have been like had not Jesus called Paul to follow Him and had not Paul obeyed the heavenly vision? Paul's great insight is that entry into the Kingdom of God depends solely on faith in Jesus Christ – whether you are a Jew or a Gentile. You don't earn God's favour because you deserve to have God love you because you are a good person. God loves you in His own inscrutable and unaccountable manner. He chooses you and calls you. All you have to do is to believe. Your sins are forgiven when you repent and turn to Christ. People who didn't understand Paul or who opposed him suggested that what Paul was saying was that it didn't matter how we behaved. Forgiveness was free. Indeed because forgiveness was a good thing you might as well sin more so that God has even more opportunities graciously to forgive you. But that's a complete misunderstanding of Paul's teaching. Having our sins forgiven by God Who loves us as we are sets us free to live good lives, to *go and do thou likewise* as Jesus says of the lawyer and the Samaritan. If you say you have faith, but don't act as if you had faith in God, then most likely your faith isn't genuine at all. When I baptise people I give them a certificate in case they ever need evidence that they have been baptised. I tell them that the best evidence that they have been baptised is how they live their lives.

January 26<sup>th</sup>

Luke 10 vv 38-42

How about we just take this story at its word?

January 27<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 v1

As a child, I was told that we can always talk to God at any time and that it doesn't matter what words we use (if any) because God knows our thoughts and He knows our needs before we tell Him. I also went to Church where we all prayed together in the very beautiful words of the Book of Common Prayer which I came to understand expresses very well many of the truths we read in Holy Scripture. So I still pray to God either in my own words or (more formally) in the words of the service books of the Church. Personally, I've never felt the need for other books of prayers nor for corporate prayers for Christian institutions such as the Mothers Union or the Plume Trust of which I am chairman. I may be depriving myself of a valuable resource in not reading and perhaps praying prayers written by other people of deep spiritual insight. I think I probably am undervaluing the concept of a common prayer which all the members of a Christian organisation can pray alone or together as a sign of their common fellowship and particular Christian service.

January 28<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 v2

Jesus did give His followers – all Christians – a common prayer, which both expresses our unity and our shared commitment to serve God in the world as we are sustained by the resources which He supplies. That unity, love, faith & commitment is expressed in that one word *Father*.

January 29<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 v2

Jesus is recorded as giving His disciples this prayer in two places in the New Testament – here and in the course of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 vv 9-13. The wording is slightly different in the two locations. It is perfectly possible that Jesus taught this prayer on more than one occasion and that He might have used slightly different words. The differences are smoothed out a bit in translations such as the King James version probably because the scribes who copied some of the ancient manuscripts wrote what they knew by heart from attending services rather than copying what was in front of them. So you might find less familiar forms of the Lord's Prayer in other bible translations. The form we use in Church is the form you find in Matthew. So you may not have the words *which art in heaven* here but they are implicit.



January 30<sup>th</sup> (Epiphany 4)

Luke 11 v2

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

For years, I've said that *Thy Will be done* is the very essence of prayer. There is nothing which we could ask for that would be better for us than that God's Will is done. Does *Thy Will be done* mean much the same thing as *Thy Kingdom Come*? After all, surely God's Kingdom is where and when God's Will is done. Someone said that when someone prays *Thy Will be done* he should add *by me*. Yes, we pray that God's Will might be done throughout the universe, but isn't the best place for us to start is with us ourselves doing God's Will every day? I was a little surprised to read an article in which someone said that the true essence of prayer is *Hallowed by thy name*. More on that tomorrow.

January 31<sup>st</sup>

*Hallowed be Thy Name.*

I'd start with the third commandment *Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain*. It's much more than refraining from using God's Name as a swear word. It's holding God in such awe that even His Name is sacred to us. A true appreciation of the holiness of God brings us to repent of our sins. Repentance means forgiveness and renewal. We are better people and serve God better in the world if our sense of God's holiness brings us to a sense of our own unworthiness with the result that God cleanses us from our sins and sets us free to serve Him Whose service is perfect freedom.

It would be taking the LORD's Name in vain to use it in cursing or magic or to try to claim God's authority for what in fact are our own opinions or ideas.

Where God's Name is hallowed, He is worshipped, His good gifts to us are received faithfully and thankfully and we are inspired to share as generously as He is generous to us.

God's Name is hallowed because He is so good to us. A virtuous circle is set up of blessing, thanksgiving and further blessing.

As CHRISTians we bear the Holy Name. If we live up to His Name, His Name is hallowed. If we behave in a way which is unworthy of Christ, we dishonour His Name.

**Psalm 67.** **GOD** be merciful unto us, and bless us : and shew us the light of his countenance, and be merciful unto us: 2. That thy way may be known upon earth : thy saving health among all nations. 3. Let the people praise thee, O God : yea, let all the people praise thee. 4. O let the nations rejoice and be glad : for thou shalt judge the folk righteously, and govern the nations upon earth. 5. Let the people praise thee, O God : let all the people praise thee. 6. Then shall the earth bring forth her increase : and God, even our own God, shall give us his blessing. 7. God shall bless us : and all the ends of the world shall fear him.

February 1<sup>st</sup>

Luke 11 v3

*Give us this day our  $\epsilon\pi\iota\upsilon\sigma\tau\iota\omicron\varsigma$  bread.*

But what does that Greek word mean? It's an extremely rare word. Usually we translate it *daily* which I take to mean *feed us every day*. Some people think it just means *feed us today* and we should be content with that, not storing up for the future. [The Israelites only gathered enough manna each day for what they needed that day (except they gathered two days' supply before the Sabbath).] Some people think it actually means *feed us tomorrow* – presumably because we're OK today. Some people think that it is the bread we need for the future – either the bread we need to sustain our mortal existence so long as we are here on earth or the Bread of Life (Jesus, Holy Communion even) Who/Which sustains our eternal life. Or it might just mean our rations, such as a serving soldier might draw each day. Any or all of those meanings could make sense and you can pray any of them, perhaps changing what you mean by this prayer depending on what's on your mind. In Church we acknowledge our sins as we assemble and meet together to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul. That about covers it!

February 2<sup>nd</sup> (Candlemas)

Luke 11 v4

*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.*

It's sin that divides us from God and sin, therefore, which is the cause of all our troubles. God doesn't desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn away from his wickedness and live. God is eager to forgive our sins. We only have to ask Him. But Jesus is emphatic that we must also be ready to forgive those who have sinned against us. It's not always easy to do so, but it is corrosive of our well-being if we can't or won't forgive what other people have done to us.

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

February 3<sup>rd</sup>

Luke 11 v4

*Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.*

*Do not bring us to the time of trial* is another attempt to translate the first half of this verse into something which we can comprehend. Why would God lead us into temptation? James (1<sup>13-15</sup>) tells us not to blame God when we are tempted. It's our own fault if we follow our own lusts and selfish desires. S Paul promises that God will not allow us to be tempted (or tried) beyond what we can bear (I Corinthians 10<sup>13</sup>). God did put Abraham to the test when He ordered him to sacrifice his son Isaac, but then God sent the angel to stay Abraham's hand and save the boy's life. The omniscient God would have known both that Abraham would pass the test and that Isaac would survive. There is nothing which happens outside the Providence of God. There are some things which we just cannot understand. All we can do is to pray in faith to the God Who knows all things, can do all things and is Love. This hymn is based on Genesis 32<sup>24-32</sup>. I appreciate it much better than I used to!

1, Come, O Thou Traveller  
unknown,  
Whom still I hold but cannot  
see;  
My company before is gone,  
And I am left alone with Thee;  
With Thee all night I mean to

stay,  
And wrestle till the break of  
day.  
2, I need not tell Thee who I  
am,  
My sin and misery declare;

Thyself hast called me by my  
name,  
Look on Thy hands, and read it  
there;  
But who, I ask Thee, who art  
Thou?  
Tell me Thy name, and tell me  
now.

3, In vain Thou strugglest to get  
free;  
I never will unloose my hold;  
Art Thou the Man that died for  
me?  
The secret of Thy love unfold;  
Wrestling, I will not let Thee go,  
Till I Thy name, Thy nature  
know.

4, Yield to me now, for I am  
weak,  
But confident in self-despair;  
Speak to my heart, in blessings  
speak,  
Be conquered by my instant  
prayer;

February 4<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 v4

*Deliver us from evil.*

This could be translated *Deliver us from the evil one* – ie the Devil or Satan. Satan is the one who accuses us before God. We normally think of the Devil as being the one who tempts us. We think of the Devil as being the originator of evil. But the Devil is no rival to God. Even the Devil can do nothing but what God allows him to do. God is infinitely more powerful than Satan. Christ's victory on the Cross is complete. Whatever accusation Satan makes against us, our sins are forgiven in Christ. However the Devil may seek to tempt us, God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. Whatever ever evil the Devil devises is overcome by God.

**O GOD**, merciful Father, that despisest not the sighing of a contrite heart, nor the desire of such as be sorrowful; Mercifully assist our prayers which we make before thee in all our troubles and adversities,

Speak, or Thou never hence  
shalt move,  
And tell me if Thy name be  
Love.

5, 'Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou  
diedst for me,  
I hear Thy whisper in my heart;  
The morning breaks, the  
shadows flee:  
Pure, universal Love Thou art;  
To me, to all Thy mercies move;  
Thy nature and Thy name is  
Love.

6, Lame as I am, I take the  
prey;  
Hell, earth and sin, with ease  
o'ercome.  
I leap for joy, pursue my way,  
And, as a bounding hart, I run,  
Through all eternity to prove  
Thy nature and Thy name is  
Love.

whensoever they oppress us; and graciously hear us, that those evils which the craft and subtilty of the devil or man worketh against us be brought to nought; and by the providence of thy goodness they may be dispersed; that we thy servants, being hurt by no persecutions, may evermore give thanks unto thee in thy holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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

February 5<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 5-10

We're not always pleased to see people, even our friends, when they turn up at inconvenient times and make demands on us. We might entertain their wishes because they are our friends. We might give them what they want if only to get rid of them! God is always our friend and never wants to get rid of us. He doesn't always, however, give us what we want when we ask for it. Sometimes it just wouldn't be good for us. Sometimes it would be better for us to wait for it. Sometimes, He might grant us what we ask for straightaway. The thing is to keep praying. God is better than any human friend and He will always give us what is best for us.

**ALMIGHTY** God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee; and dost promise, that when two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests; Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants, as may be most expedient for them; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting.

*Amen.*

February 6<sup>th</sup> (Epiphany 5, 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Accession HMQ) Luke 11 vv 11-13

The Queen is herself a woman of faith. She takes very seriously her responsibilities and duties. She holds very significant offices as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, our Head of State & Head of State of several other nations, Head of the Commonwealth etc.. She is a very special person. We honour her as we give thanks for her long reign – the longest of any British monarch. But Queen Elizabeth II, like you and I, draws everything she needs to fulfil her vocation from one source – God's Holy Spirit.

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

February 7<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 14-17

*A house divided against a house falleth.*

Jesus here is speaking about Satan's Kingdom, but what He says is universally applicable – to good institutions as well as bad. How much more could the Church achieve for good if we didn't quarrel and bicker among ourselves? Why are we so easily divided, the one from the other? That, I think, is the Devil's work. The same can be true in politics. Parties with high ideals, parliaments even with the good of the nation genuinely at their hearts, fail to achieve their potential for good because they are too susceptible to rowing among themselves. Even families are divided by arguments, jealousy and recriminations, sometimes long after the cause of the original quarrel has been forgotten. That too is the Devil's work.

**Psalm 133. BEHOLD**, how good and joyful a thing it is : brethren, to dwell together in unity! 2. It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down unto the beard : even unto Aaron's beard, and went down to the skirts of his clothing. 3. Like as the dew of Hermon : which fell upon the hill of Sion. 4. For there the Lord promised his blessing : and life for evermore.

February 8<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 18-20

The misunderstandings which divide people seem sometimes almost to be wilful. It is as if people were looking for a reason to quarrel with one another. What Jesus says here is so obviously true and yet His opponents cannot or will not understand what He is saying. Do we sometimes do this – allow the Devil to cloud our understanding of what is good in the people we are disagreeing with? A professor of Ethics taught me always to ascribe the best possible motives to people and to consider their words and actions in the best possible light. It's too easy to assume the worst of our opponents or even of our friends.

February 9<sup>th</sup>

Luke 18 vv 21-23

He who bore all pain  
and loss  
comfortless upon the  
cross,  
lives in glory now on  
high,  
pleads for us, and  
hears our cry: Alleluia.

He whose path no  
records tell,  
who descended into  
hell,  
who the strong man  
armed hath bound,  
now in highest heaven  
is crowned.  
Alleluia.

He who slumbered in  
the grave  
is exalted now to save;  
now through  
Christendom it rings  
that the Lamb is King  
of kings.  
Alleluia.

February 10<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 24-26

I struggle with this passage, perhaps because I got caught up in taking it too literally. Someone I knew at college suffered from depression – in his case almost certainly a depressive illness. Some of his friends thought that he was possessed and he himself went along with this diagnosis. I don't know quite what happened, but there was an improvement and then there was the fear that things were becoming much worse. Some people interpreted these events in the light of these words of Jesus. Almost certainly, they were wrong to do so. I don't believe the man in question ever had been possessed and, if he had, he wouldn't necessarily have relapsed after what ever treatment he received. He and I remained friends for a long time after this and, while he had his problems, some of them self-inflicted, I don't ascribe any of them to the direct influence of demons. I can't, however, rule out a literal interpretation of any Scripture.

Henry Alford, the great Victorian commentator, takes these words as a sort of allegory. In the Bible, the people of Israel turned to idolatry and brought evil on themselves. God gave them a spirit of repentance and they were restored. Then they lapsed again into idolatry and suffered the consequences. This happened time after time. Alford points out that the Christian Church has only too often followed the same path. There have been great revivals in Church history only for the Church to fall back into evil ways or half-heartedness and indifference, *having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof*. Individual Christians too, he says, may go through periods when they sincerely seek wholeheartedly to live as Jesus would have us live only to fall back into a mere formalism.

G B Caird understands the matter this way. The parable of the empty house presents the same lesson in microcosm. The heart of man is a house which must have an occupant, and the only way to ensure that it is not taken over by disreputable squatters is to see that it is inhabited by the God who made it for himself. Exorcism is not enough: the spiritual world, like the natural, abhors a vacuum.

February 11<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 27&28

**MY** soul doth magnify the Lord : and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded : the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold, from henceforth : all generations shall call me blessed.

Mary was truly blessed to be chosen to be the Mother of God. Yet we are equally blessed if, like Mary, we hear the word of God and keep it. The Word made flesh grew in Mary's Womb. The Lord our God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – dwells in the hearts of those who put their faith in Him.

February 12<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 29-32

What would get people to believe in Jesus? They could read about His life and what He taught in the Bible. Many won't even do that. Some of those who do know what Jesus did and taught may admire Him, but they don't give their lives to Him. They could come to meet Him in the fellowship of the Church, but they choose not to. Admittedly, church congregations aren't always a very good advertisement for Christianity, but He is among us and those who are genuinely seeking will find. The very real failures of Christians are often no more than excuses for staying away from Church and refusing to commit to Jesus. From what we read in the Bible, it is apparent that even witnessing miracles isn't sufficient to compel people to believe. Yet the people of that rich, powerful and evil city Nineveh listened to the prophet Jonah and repented of their sins. The Queen of Sheba travelled many miles to hear the wisdom of Solomon. So why are people so resistant to Jesus?

February 13<sup>th</sup> (Septuagesima)

Luke 11 v33

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

I remember a discussion in my medical school days with a fellow Christian student as to whether or not the language of this collect was helpful in our task of sharing our faith with other people? There are things to be said on both sides of that debate. What matters much more (and can be obscured when we argue about minor matters) is that we Christians shine with the Light of Christ in the world.

February 14<sup>th</sup> (S Valentine)

Luke 11 vv 34-36

For a lot of people, S Valentine's Day is an important date in the calendar. Pubs and restaurants are booked solid. Businesses selling flowers and chocolates do very well. In some households, woe betide the man who forgets S Valentine. There is a huge selection of cards on sale in the shops from humorous to sloppy to pornographic. Well, love is one of God's greatest gifts to us and there are many kinds of love. True love is always unselfish and is therefore always to be celebrated. Relationships which put the self first and exploit or harm the people we claim to love are not true love at all. Romantic love is one of the means God uses to bring us together in marriage and to form new families. Married love and parenthood are totally committed. The self is sacrificed. The promise is of lifelong commitment whatever happens. This is what we aspire to. We know that we sometimes fail. What do we do about our failures? Only Christ lives the perfect human life – the life of total love for God and for other people. He sacrifices His own life for ours. Our response ought to be nothing less than reciprocal. II Corinthians 5<sup>14&15</sup>: *For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.*

February 15<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 37-42

I've just been having a little grumble to myself because an email arrived telling me that I need to sanitise and mask up for a meeting I'm supposed to be attending soon. I don't mind sanitising, but I absolutely loathe mask wearing. But I suppose I shall either have to miss the meeting (which I'd rather not do) or submit to the mask. I don't want to worry other people in the room and I certainly don't want to infect anyone with COVID. I'm almost 100% sure I haven't got it, but I can't be absolutely certain. Outward signs don't ultimately matter. What matters is a pure heart. Judging other people because they don't conform to our ideas about ritual in church, table manners, dress, etc. can be an indication that our hearts are not pure. We feel superior. We look down. People who behave like that don't belong with us, we think. God would rather that we loved our neighbours as ourselves than that we used the right knife for the fish. But some outward observances do matter and it would be uncharitable to disregard them.

February 16<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 43&44

To be honest, I quite like having my own seat in church. It's guaranteed even during the Christmas rush. It is more comfortable than most of the other seats which you sit on. In fact, I think there is a joke to be had in that the person who has the best seat is the one who sits down least in the service. Sometimes I wear long robes in the street or a shirt with a clerical collar. Whatever I'm wearing, I enjoy being greeted & engaging in conversations with people. I mustn't let it go to my head. We're all equal in the sight of God. We all depend solely & absolutely on Jesus for our acceptability. All baptised Christians are as much part of God's royal priesthood as are ordained ministers & on the same terms – that Christ died for us. What we clergy especially have to beware of is hypocrisy. With our robes, special place in Church, particular role in the service, expertise with biblical texts, we can appear particularly virtuous – to other people & to ourselves – & if we are not what we appear to be, we not only damn ourselves but risk bringing others down with us. Pray for your clergy & all God's people. **ALMIGHTY** & everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels; Send down upon our Bishops, & Curates, & all Congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace; & that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honour of our Advocate & Mediator, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

February 17<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 45-48

I've been wondering if these verses shed any light on the current campaign to tear down statues of sinners who died hundreds of years ago. These sinners (slave traders or whatever) were honoured in their own time but we, in our generation, righteously (or self-righteously) are sure that such sins outweigh any good that these sinners might have done – like making provision for the poor or advancing the cause of science. It's rather the opposite of what the Pharisees & lawyers have been doing. They've been doing up the tombs of notably good people who were dishonoured in their own generation – the authentic prophets who were ignored or persecuted in the past. But Jesus says that the current generation is no better than those who persecuted the prophets. Rather than condemning the sins of our forefathers, which is easy & great fun, ought we to be examining ourselves for what's wrong with us?

February 18<sup>th</sup>

Luke 11 vv 49-54

Abel was, of course, the first murder victim. When Adam & Eve disobeyed God and were cast out of the Garden of Eden, their two sons fell out – one became a murderer and suffered banishment, the other was his victim. That's what happens because humanity rejects God. The story of Zacharias' martyrdom is in II Chronicles 22-24. King Ahaziah was a bad king who was slain in the downfall of the House of Ahab. His mother, Queen Athaliah, proceeded to kill all the royal princes and seized the reins of power herself, promoting the worship of the false god Baal. One prince, Joash, escaped and the priest Jehoida organised a coup in which Athaliah & the priests of Baal were killed and the infant Joash became king with Jehoida effectively ruling as regent and re-establishing the worship of the LORD. Jehoida died and Joash grew up and lapsed into idolatrous practices. Jehoiada's son Zacharias' rebuked the idolaters and was stoned to death in the Temple. Terrible times, the Old Testament! But Jesus says that His own generation, the people He was talking to, were no better than their forefathers. In fact the long tale of murder of the innocents and martyrdom of the just culminates in His Crucifixion at the hands of those He came to save. Again, it's not for us to condemn previous generations as to ask ourselves what is wrong in our own times and how far we personally are responsible for the evil in the world.

February 19<sup>th</sup>

Luke 12 vv 1-3

Not long ago, it was reported that a victim of racism in the Church of England had been pressured to sign a non disclosure agreement. These NDAs are commonplace when powerful and wealthy organisations or individuals are finally compelled to admit that they have done wrong. The victim is compensated in return for his or her silence. An already wronged vulnerable person is bullied into keeping quiet. Thus the Church, Social Services Department, NHS Trust, major corporation or billionaire businessman gets away with its reputation intact and perhaps avoids criminal sanctions. Confidentiality, which is meant to protect the vulnerable, is all too often drafted in as an excuse for secrecy which is designed to protect the perpetrator of the abuse and the organisation for which he works. Jesus reminds us that it will all come out. The Judge Whom we all have to face knows everything.

February 20<sup>th</sup> (Sexagesima)

Luke 12 vv 4&5

**O LORD** God, who seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do; Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Who is the one who can kill and, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell? Henry Alford points out that this is the only text in the Bible in which the *he* could equally mean God or the Devil. It is God Who ends our lives when He is ready and determines our eternal destiny. It is the Devil who would like to destroy us in this life and for ever. As we've seen, however, God is infinitely more powerful than the Devil. So if we trust in God, we don't need to be afraid of anything, neither the devil nor man. But it is a reminder not to be distracted from our Christian identity by fears of what other people might think about our faith.

Fear Him, ye saints, and you will then

Have nothing else to fear;

Make you His service your delight,

Your wants shall be His care.

February 21<sup>st</sup>

Luke 12 vv 6&7

The hosts of God encamp around

The dwellings of the just;  
Deliverance He affords to all  
Who on His succour trust.

Oh, make but trial of His love,  
Experience will decide  
How blest they are, and only they,  
Who in His truth confide.

I'm not sure that we are always as sensible of the teaching contained in these two bible verses as we ought to be. God really does care for us as individuals. He is with us in every detail of our lives. We do not have to be afraid.

February 22<sup>nd</sup>

Luke 12 vv 8&9

A future Bishop of Norwich records how, when he was called up for National Service, he was afraid of the possible reaction of his fellow recruits if he knelt to pray in the barracks before getting into bed. Nobody minded or even took much notice. We may be too fearful of being seen to be Christians in the world today. People might be less disrespectful than we expect. They might even feel that they can approach us because they know what kind of people we are.

February 23<sup>rd</sup>

Luke 12 v10

Two possible errors. One is to think that God doesn't really matter. We can be disrespectful about Him. We can disobey Him. We can blaspheme His Holy Name. If there is a God, He is surely too nice to do anything about it if we ignore Him or go against Him. Galatians 6<sup>7</sup>: *God is not mocked.* However there is the reverse error. Some people are convinced that God cannot possibly love them. They are obsessed with the idea that they have done something which can never be forgiven even by God or that they are too wicked, too utterly unworthy, ever to make it into His Presence. Both these attitudes are wrong. Sin matters. Sin is injustice. God is just. Sin deserves to be punished. We are all sinners. Sin must be repented of. If we truly repent, we care very much and we seek God's grace to live in a manner pleasing to Him. But God's love is also all encompassing. He always forgives the sinner who turns to Him in faith, no matter how wicked or unworthy that sinner may be. We are all unworthy when compared to God's holiness. So what is this sin against the Holy Ghost which Jesus says is unforgiveable? I think it means that a person has so hardened himself against God that he is incapable of feeling remorse or of accepting love. If you think you might come in the category, you're wrong. If you can feel fear or love, you are not totally closed and, if there is an opening, God can come in by it. *Save, Lord, by love or fear.*

February 24<sup>th</sup> (S Matthias)

Luke 12 vv 11&12

A Victorian Archbishop of Canterbury was on holiday one Sunday and attended Church. The sermon was, to say the least, unhelpful. After the service, the vicar told the archbishop that, having once preached what people said was one of his best sermons ever extempore and without preparation, he had vowed never to prepare a sermon again, but simply to rely on speaking as the Spirit moved him when he got up into the pulpit. The archbishop immediately released him from his vow. God does indeed tell us what to say and how to act when we find ourselves in situations for which we are unable to prepare. He does, however, expect us to use the gifts He has given us to prepare for tasks that we know we are going to have to perform – including preaching. That means prayerfully thinking before one gets up into the pulpit what might be God's message for this congregation today.

February 25<sup>th</sup>

Luke 12 vv 13-15

*For a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.* I often quote that, partly I admit, because I like the fact that it's such a tongue twister. But it is so pertinent in our very materialistic twenty first century. What does really matter in life? In this particular case, two brothers are quarrelling over their inheritance, but which is more important really – brotherly love or money? How much damage does it do to us as people if we are greedy for things and experiences, fret about what we haven't got and are jealous of people who we think we are better off than we are? How much of global warming is a result of the manufacture, transportation and eventual disposal of goods that we don't need? How much of the poverty in the world is caused by a minority of selfish people taking more than their fair share of the world's resources in the mistaken belief that wealth will bring them peace of mind? How many people miss life's true goal, peace with God, because they devote all their efforts to acquiring things that can never satisfy?

February 26<sup>th</sup>

Luke 12 vv 16-21

So what should the rich man have done with his magnificent harvest? The most obvious answer is that he should have given it away to the poor. Whatever he should have done with it, his basic mistake was in thinking that his wealth was what mattered about him. He'd got years left in which to eat, drink and be merry. But he died that night as we shall all die one day. And you can't take it with you. It's pointless to lay up treasure for yourself. What matters is to be right with God. If he's known that, the rich man would have been happier in this life and better off in the world to come. See I Timothy 6 <sup>6</sup> But godliness with contentment is great gain. <sup>7</sup> For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. <sup>8</sup> And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. <sup>9</sup> But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. <sup>10</sup> For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. <sup>11</sup> But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. <sup>12</sup> Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.

February 27<sup>th</sup> (Quinquagesima)

Luke 12 vv 22-30

What is the reason for the accelerating decline in religion we have witnessed over the last few decades? I might be quite wrong about this but I wonder if it is to do with our increasing alienation from Nature. Most people live in towns rather than in the countryside. There are more & more reasons to stay indoors as houses become more comfortable & people become more fearful about going out. Jobs are increasingly indoors. We travel in metal boxes instead of on our own two feet. We shop in indoor shopping centres & therefore don't get any fresh air as we walk from one shop to another. Even the sky is obscured by atmospheric pollution & also by light pollution by night. To an extent, we control Nature. We don't even experience the weather very much, being indoors for so much of the time. Does this separation from Nature obscure our vision of our Creator? I imagine Jesus saying these things in a flowery meadow rich in wildlife. Look around you. See things in perspective. What really matters in life? Trust God. He knows what He's doing. **O LORD**, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost & pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace & of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee; Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. *Amen.*

February 28<sup>th</sup>

Luke 12 vv 31-34

Think back to your last year at school. Was what Jesus says to us here today in these verses anything like what your teachers or careers advisor told you? Did your parents ever talk to you about your future life in these terms? If not, if you come from a Christian home, why not?

March 1<sup>st</sup>

Luke 12 vv 35-40

There is a powerful sense in the Gospel of the importance of being on the alert. Watch! Pray! The Kingdom of God is at Hand. The Lord could return at any time. Make sure you are ready to receive Him. You will have to give account for what you are doing with your life. There is a sense of urgency. Get on with your Christian calling. Do what you have to do. Don't delay. The saved are the seed sown in good ground, not on the path to be devoured by the devil, not on stony ground to wither in the face of persecution, not among weeds to be choked off by the things of this world. The saved bear an abundance of fruit.

March 2<sup>nd</sup> (Ash Wednesday)

Luke 12 vv 41-48

The Battle for Advent is almost lost, even in Church. The idea of a solemn season in which we prepare for the coming of the Lord has become almost totally swallowed up in celebrating Christmas ever earlier every year. The Battle for Lent looks like going the same way. The Christian celebration of the Resurrection is increasingly mixed up with pagan and commercial features such as the Easter bunny and brought forward to the exclusion of any observance of a reflective preparation for the day when we shall meet our Lord. It may be, that for missionary and pastoral reasons, we have to go along with the world's celebration of Christmas and Easter in order to retain these opportunities to share the Good News of Christ, but we should be foolish if we allowed ourselves to get carried away by the flood of shallow celebration of what is increasingly poorly understood and to neglect the seriousness of God's call to us and His demand for a whole-hearted response to His Love.

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

March 3<sup>rd</sup>

Luke 12 vv 49-53

A little while ago, Church of England schools were advised by the Church authorities not to sing confessional hymns in assembly. By *confessional* they meant specifically Christian. The underlying principle is inclusivity. Staff and pupils should not feel excluded because they cannot conscientiously sing particularly Christians hymns because they belong to another faith or don't believe in God at all. Religion is often praised by government because it promotes social cohesion. It brings people together. It creates bonds of affection and mutual support. Religion promotes community. It very often inspires charity. On the other hand, religion is often criticised for creating division. *If you are not with me, you are against me.* If you stand up unrelentingly for what is right, you are bound to provoke opposition. You can't compromise with evil. You can't go along with evil people. So how do you fight for the right without causing a war?



March 4<sup>th</sup>

Luke 12 vv 54-57

We ended yesterday with a hard question. There are many hard questions in life. What ought we to do to reduce climate change without plunging humanity into poverty? How many COVID deaths are we prepared to tolerate in order to restore our freedom to live what used to be normal lives? How do we balance the rights of trans people with those of natal women? In what circumstances can vows be broken or released from if they prove tremendously difficult or apparently impossible to fulfil? There are hard questions, but the underlying principle is very simple. It is love. Once we accept that fact, I think the answers to the questions become clearer. The truth is ultimately simple. We ought to be able to discern the signs of the times, to recognise Jesus manifest in every situation.

March 4<sup>th</sup>

Luke 12 vv 58&59

Some questions are very hard and remain so even when we accept that the wisdom we need to solve them is also love. Often, however, it is perfectly plain what we ought to do and we ought to get on and do it in order to avoid the consequences of our failure to do so. How often have I been at a meeting at which the choices are perfectly obvious but something seems to hold back the meeting from making them and putting them into effect? Sometimes, we just don't want to see the obvious and make out that things are more complex than they really are.

March 5<sup>th</sup>

Luke 13 vv 1-5

This passage is often quoted in discussions about the relationship between sin and suffering. The victims of the massacre and the people on whom the tower collapsed were not worse sinners than the rest of us. It is always hasty and often cruel to think that people who are suffering must have done something to deserve it. It can be corrosive if think that the troubles we ourselves suffer must be some kind of punishment for our wickedness. On the other hand, there is some connection between sin and suffering. There is justice. There would be no suffering in a perfect world. We shouldn't oversimplify, draw hasty conclusions, too readily blame other people or ourselves for what is wrong in the world. On the other hand, Jesus said: *Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.*

March 6<sup>th</sup> (Lent 1)

Luke 13 vv 6-9

**O LORD**, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights; Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness, and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. *Amen*  
The obvious interpretation of this parable applies it to the Israelites. God had planted them in the land of Canaan. He expected them to bear fruit in terms of worshipping Him & keeping His commandments, loving Him with all their hearts & their neighbours as themselves. Time after time, they had failed to do so and God had given them chance after chance. The gardener begs the owner to give the tree yet one more chance, just as we sometimes do when we are disappointed with a houseplant. There comes a time, however, when even the most patient gardener gives up & cuts down the unpromising plant. God had been patient with Israel. Jesus had interceded for them. But there eventually comes a time of judgment and the determinedly unfruitful run out of chances. It is tempting for Christians to feel superior to the Jews and to think of ourselves as having taken their place in God's plan. Rather than judging other people, however, we ought to be judging ourselves. Are we bearing fruit for God? Galatians 5<sup>22</sup> *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,*  
<sup>23</sup> *Meekness, temperance:* Lent is about being ready for Easter, being ready to meet the Risen Christ? Will He find us ready to receive Him when He comes to call us home?

March 7<sup>th</sup>

Luke 13 vv 11-17

Obviously, the Sabbath is a great blessing. It is a day off from work, a day of rest. It is an opportunity to spend time with your family and friends and to join in recreational activities. There is more time to spend with God and to meet with His people to worship Him. It is a foretaste of the rest which remains for the people of God and awaits us in Heaven. On the other hand, we can so distort the Sabbath that it becomes a burden. We outlaw joy. We look down on other people who keep Sunday differently from the way we do or who don't observe the Sabbath at all. Many Christians hardly bother with the Sabbath at all these days, even though keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. So what should we do about keeping Sunday special?

March 8<sup>th</sup>

Luke 13 vv 18&19

I'm feeling a bit frustrated at the moment. Where I had great hopes for growth thirty odd years ago and there was growth for a time, things now seem to be going backwards. We do our best, but there are times (many times) when our best seems to make no difference. In terms both of numbers and influence, the Church in Britain and in many European countries and even in America seems to be going through a bad patch. Our numbers are down. Our confidence is shaky. Our influence is declining. We appear to be increasingly insignificant, just as a mustard seed looks no different from a speck of dust. And yet, there is life in that speck of dust. In the power of God, it has the potential to grow into a sturdy tree which takes its own vital place in the ecosystem of the garden.

[This is not the mustard we grow as children with cress. This tree grows wild in Israel but was also cultivated. Given favourable conditions, the plant reaches a height of more than six feet. It is said that a man having sown "a single seed of mustard... would climb it as he would a fig tree" The seed is very small (1–1.6 mm.) and was used to indicate the smallest measure of size.]

March 9<sup>th</sup>

Luke 13 vv 20&21

The point about yeast is that it has to be mixed in with the flour and other ingredients. It then does its work, converting some of the sugar and starch into alcohol (which evaporates) and carbon dioxide which makes the bread rise. In that famous saying, Christians are in the world, though not of the world. Some Christians believe that *loving not the world* and *being unspotted* from the world mean not associating with people who are not Christians. In some churches, there are so many services, meetings, study groups, etc that their members' time is fully occupied with church affairs. Some Christians are very reticent about admitting to be Christians when they are mixing with people who are not Christians. If the yeast stayed in the tin, or if the yeast grains didn't mingle with the flour, fat, salt and water, or if they blushed to interact with the sugar and starch, the bread would remain unleavened and the yeast wouldn't grow either. Maybe some Christians are called to solitude or to be cloistered in Christian communities. Most are not!

March 10<sup>th</sup>

Luke 13 vv 22&23

*Lord, are there few that be saved?*

We'd all like to know the answer to that one. Some of us would like to hope that everyone will be saved in the end. S Paul talks about *God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth* (I Timothy 2<sup>4</sup>). Paul does, however, (as I understand him) teach that there will be a judgment and that only those to whom God has given the grace of faith manifest in good works will be saved. There may be many people in the world today – victims of atrocities, crimes, betrayals, etc. – who would think it outrageous if the perpetrators of evil in the end got away with it. Then there are those of us who know that we are all sinners and that none of us deserve to be saved, who believe that our salvation is through our faith in Jesus Christ alone. We may wonder then why some people don't have this faith and what happens to them. So, like the man in this story, we have many questions about salvation. And Jesus doesn't give him the answer that he wants. Probably, we wouldn't understand. Jesus says to Nicodemus (John 3<sup>12</sup>): *If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I speak of heavenly things?*

March 11<sup>th</sup>

Luke 13 v24

Instead of explaining to this man God's plan for the whole human race, other people, people in general, He speaks specifically to His hearers there and then, as He speaks specifically to you and me, here and now. *Strive to enter in at the strait gate.* Salvation is not something to be taken for granted, a light thing that doesn't really matter because we're all guaranteed to be saved in the end. Following Jesus means being prepared to take up our cross daily – far from easy, impossible without the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit Whom God promises to give to those who ask faithfully. Passages like these do make me wonder about the Church's present day obsession with numbers. There is a great deal in the Bible about strait gates and narrow ways, faithful remnants and little flocks. Generally speaking, it is preachers who tell people what they want to hear who are popular and preachers who tell people what God wants them to hear are disregarded or even persecuted. Would God rather have Church with only three people who are trying to please Him or three hundred who are there to please themselves?

### March 12<sup>th</sup>

Luke 13 vv 24-28

Again, we can read these verses as if they only applied to the Jews in Jesus' own time on earth in the flesh. They've seen Him and touched Him. They've heard His voice and observed His miracles. And yet they haven't believed. They haven't obeyed His voice. They haven't followed Him. Like oil and water, they have existed together in the same place, but have not mixed. It's not our place, however, to judge the Jews or anyone else. Only God is qualified to judge. But don't these verses also apply to churches - Churches that have persecuted those whom they believe to be heretics, Churches which have preached holy war, Churches which have accrued vast wealth at the expense of the poor? Will Jesus know them as His own on the Day of Judgment? They've eaten and drunk with Him in Holy Communion. They've repeated His teachings in their Churches and on the streets. But will He recognise them as His own family when He comes to judge the quick and the dead? But it's relatively easy to see the mote in our brother's eye, whether first century Jew or Christians at other times and in other Churches and in other lands. But is there a beam in our own eye? Are our Churches communities in which we all love one another as Christ loves us and act accordingly?

### March 13<sup>th</sup> (Lent 2)

Luke 13 vv 29&30

God is working his purpose out  
as year succeeds to year:  
God is working his purpose  
out, and the time is drawing  
near;  
nearer and nearer draws the  
time,  
the time that shall surely be,  
when the earth shall be filled  
with the glory of God  
as the waters cover the sea.

give ear to me, ye continents,  
ye isles, give ear to me,  
that the earth may filled  
with the glory of God as the  
waters cover the sea.

What can we do to work God's  
work, to prosper and increase  
the brotherhood of all mankind,  
the reign of the Prince of Peace?  
What can we do to hasten the  
time, the time that shall surely  
be,  
when the earth shall be filled  
with the glory of God as the  
waters cover the sea.

From utmost east to utmost  
west, where're man's foot hath  
trod,  
by the mouth of many  
messengers goes forth the voice  
of God;

March we forth in the strength

of God, with the banner of  
Christ unfurled,  
that the light of the glorious  
gospel of truth may shine  
throughout the world:  
fight we the fight with sorrow  
and sin to set their captives  
free,  
that the earth may filled with  
the glory of God as the waters  
cover the sea.

All we can do is nothing worth  
unless God blessed the deed;  
vainly we hope for the harvest-  
tide till God gives life to the  
seed;  
yet nearer and nearer draws  
the time, the time that shall  
surely be,  
when the earth shall be filled  
with the glory of God as the  
waters cover the sea.

I like these confident Victorian hymns. We can be confident in God. So long as we believe that it is God Who gives life to the seed, we can sow and cultivate in the sure and certain hope of the final harvest. Though note that we may well be in for some surprises. *There are last which shall be first, and there are fast which shall be first.*

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

### March 14<sup>th</sup>

Luke 13 vv 31-35

Were the Pharisees genuinely concerned for our Lord's safety? Did they hope to disrupt His mission by frightening Him into going home and giving up? Did they want to discredit Him by making Him look like a coward by running away?

Whatever, He had work to do, God's commission to fulfil. So have we and we ought to let nothing deter or discourage us from doing those good works which God has prepared for each one of us to walk in.

God doesn't desire the death of a sinner. Jesus didn't desire the destruction of Jerusalem. But God gives us human beings freedom to choose and wilful disobedience results in disaster. The world only works when we follow the Maker's instructions.

March 15<sup>th</sup>

Luke 14 vv 1-6

Doctors don't very often talk about dropsy nowadays. They call it oedema. There is swelling, commonly in the legs. It very often indicates heart or kidney disease. In the past, not much could be done about it. It was debilitating and an indication that something was seriously wrong. Very often (but not always of course) oedema or dropsy can be effectively treated today and it is not too much to worry about. So doctors don't frighten patients by using the old word which might make them think of something their grandparents had. Doctors use medical language to avoid frightening patients and sometimes to avoid embarrassing themselves. They are careful what they call parts of the body and what names they use for various illnesses. Sometimes, using a difficult medical term enables a doctor to appear to do his duty to tell the patient what is wrong without really telling him anything or it might just make the doctor appear more important and better educated because uses big words. Communication is complex and nuanced. It's not always simply a matter of narrating the facts. There is a big emotional element too, helping people to comprehend as much of the truth as they can bear and to deal with what they have to face.

This can be true of religious language too. I think we sometimes diminish our attempts to communicate the mysteries of our faith when we try to express them in excessively plain language, just as we sometimes obscure what is beautifully simple by using unnecessarily difficult words.

March 16<sup>th</sup>

Luke 14 vv 7-11

Status. How much does it matter? Do we worry if we're not dressed as smartly as other people at the function? Does it matter to us whether or not we sit at the top table? To be honest, I was once quite offended when I discovered that I and a number of others had only been invited to the hors d'ouvres at a posh dinner and only the more honourable guests got to stay on for the main course and the dessert. I suppose I shouldn't have been. I was lucky to be invited to the hors d'ouvres and I did know what Jesus had said to the Pharisee's guests. Rather a direct application of our Lord's teaching.

March 17<sup>th</sup> (S Patrick)

Luke 14 vv 12-14

Now, which of us is going to take this literally? It's not just that we hope to advance our social position by eating with the right people or that we hope that they'll invite us to their houses. It's also the thought that these poor people might not have bathed, be poorly dressed & have uncouth manners. Why should we invite a lot of poor people in off the street in preference to our friends & kinsfolk? I don't mind giving to the foodbank or putting some money in the Christian Aid envelope. Some of us might even volunteer to help at a soup kitchen. But invite people off the street into your own home? Might you not be putting your own family at risk? But is giving to charity or helping out at the homeless shelter really treating poor people as our friends & brothers? We can say that Jesus exaggerates what He requires of us in order to make us think. We can argue that what might have been practical in Palestine 2,000 years ago just wouldn't work in twenty first century Britain. But if we don't take His words literally, how do we apply them? And if we don't apply them, what's the point of reading them? Why did Jesus trouble to teach us if He didn't expect us to do what He says?

March 18<sup>th</sup>

Luke 14 vv 15-24

Those of you who know me know that I insist that Holy Communion should be the principal service on every Sunday & Holy Day & that, if there is only one service on any such day, that it should be the Lord's Supper. It's the service Jesus gave us. It's what He told us to do. He said nothing about Mattins & Evensong, Family Services, Cafe Church or Fresh Expressions. Those are all good things to do & we may do them as well as celebrating Holy Communion, but never instead. I know that a number of you disagree with me about this but I cannot really see on what you base your point of view. Our Lord's words recorded in the Bible & the practice of the Church from earliest times until the present day put Holy Communion at the very centre of our worship. After much persuasion, I got my last Church to agree that we should have HC as the principal service every week & not substitute Mattins for the Lord's Supper once a month. It so happened that this was the appointed Gospel one Sunday at about that time. How familiar the excuses sound, but are they any more valid now than they were 2,000 years ago? This passage is not specifically about public worship, but it is about always being ready to respond to God's invitation.

March 19<sup>th</sup>

Luke 14 vv 25-27

We do find these verses hard. Nobody would want to be crucified. Nobody would want to give up his family. So why does Jesus say these things? The answer is that God must absolutely come first in our lives. We'd die a martyr's death before we'd renounce our faith. If our family came between us and Jesus, we'd choose Jesus. Thankfully, most of us are not called to be martyrs and, for most of us, care of our families is straightforwardly part of our duty to God – honouring our parents in accordance with the Ten Commandments, keeping our marriage vows, taking care of our children and dependent relatives. But there are people who may be confronted with the possibility of martyrdom in the world today. There are families who would renounce (even denounce to the authorities) a brother or daughter who became a Christian. But, much less dramatically, what about that low level attrition which so many Christians in England experience? Family and friends who want you to spend time with them rather than going to Church or doing Christian activities, family and friends who expect you to relax the rules you try, as a Christian, to live by. We don't want to fall out with our loved ones, but our own faith dies slowly if we become cut off from the fellowship of the Church and compromise our Christian values.

March 20<sup>th</sup> (Lent 3)

Luke 14 vv 28-33

Sometimes I wonder. We do everything we can to bring people into the Church. We play down the commitment required of believers. But, reading these words of Jesus, I wonder if we are doing the right thing. Certainly, the Church should be welcoming. Certainly, we should encourage people to join us. We should put no obstacles whatsoever in the path of those seeking God in our churches. But are we deceiving them if we don't spell out to them what it means to be a Christian? We don't want to put people off. But if we play down too much the difference being a Christian makes to our lives, people might wonder why they should join us anyway? Ernest Shackleton is supposed to have advertised for men to accompany him on his Antarctic in these words. *Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.* If he did, it was honest of him. Perhaps we should adopt the same tactics? PTO for prayer.

**WE** beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
*Amen.*

March 21<sup>st</sup> (First Day of Spring)

Luke 14 vv 34&35

1816 was described as the Year Without a Summer. The weather never warmed up. The crops failed. Many went hungry in many parts of the world. The probable explanation was a volcanic explosion in what is now Indonesia. June, July and August failed to perform. What's the use of the summer months if there is no Summer? What's the use of Christians if they are not people of faith, hope & love?

March 22<sup>nd</sup>

Luke 15 vv 1&2

*This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.*

When your children are growing up and, especially as they become more independent, you try to monitor their friendships. You don't want them getting in with bad crowd. Even as an adult, you may be careful who your friends are. You don't want to *follow a multitude to do evil*. You try to remain *unspotted from the world*. As a Christian, you probably don't enjoy the kinds of things that "sinners" enjoy. Anyway, we hope we don't. We want to mix with the right people who will help us and support us in living decent and prosperous lives. There is also the question of reputation. It is often believed that a man can be judged by the company he keeps.

All this is common sense, some might call it *Christian common sense*. Obviously we don't want to be corrupted by keeping bad company. And yet, if we ask ourselves *What would Jesus do?* we are confronted by the awkward fact of what He actually did. *This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them*. It is true that He resisted temptation whereas we too often don't and therefore He didn't have to worry about being led astray by bad company. He doesn't seem to have cared a about His reputation, though Proverbs 22<sup>21</sup> says, *A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches*. He actually liked sinners. He enjoyed their company. He didn't merely patronise the poor, the outcasts and those condemned by polite society. He ate with them. And He said to us, *Follow me*.

March 23<sup>rd</sup>

Luke 15 vv 3-7

As you know, the Church of England is increasingly looking to business and the secular state for models of governance. If you know me, you also know that I don't like it much! Some years ago, when they were trying to introduce some scheme for evaluating clergy and their performance, I emailed an archdeacon quoting this parable. What commercial sense would it make for a shepherd or pastor to leave 99 sheep in the wilderness and go and look for the one which went astray? Of course, it would make very little sense. The ninety nine might themselves get lost, stolen or eaten by predatory wild animals. The pastor in question might find himself facing disciplinary action. As we've seen, the Bible is far more interested in the faithfulness of God's people than the numbers of people claiming to members of God's flock. The Church is called to base her work on faith, hope and charity, not pounds, shillings and pence. The point of the parable is that God loves the sheep which has gone astray and does everything possible to bring it home. The Church manager who is concerned mainly with assessment, numbers, money and what may be measured will expect the paid pastors of the Church to concentrate on the well-being of the existing members and not to waste time and effort on the strays. And so such a Church gradually shrinks until it dies.

March 24<sup>th</sup>

Luke 15 vv 8-10

The Lost Coin is possibly the least well known of the three parables of *lost and found* in Luke 15, maybe because it is the shortest and perhaps the least dramatic. The point is the same. God eagerly seeks for the lost. If we know that we are lost without Him, we are very thankful that we have been found. Maybe the ninety nine sheep in the wilderness and the nine pieces of silver which were not lost represent those who have already been found. Or is there a danger that the ninety nine sheep and the nine coins don't yet know that they need a Saviour?

1 Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now I see.

2 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
and grace my fears relieved;  
how precious did that grace appear  
the hour I first believed!

March 25<sup>th</sup> (The Annunciation)

Luke 15 vv 11-13

In a way, this is the story of the human race. We have taken the good things God has given to us and *wasted our substance with riotous living*. We have been ungrateful to God and selfish. I hardly need to list the consequences of human sin. Read the paper. Look around your neighbourhood and even your own home. Look in the mirror. The gifts God has freely given to us rebels we so often use for evil purposes rather than good. We use the skills God has given us to make weapons rather than to end poverty and conquer disease. Some of us consume and waste far too much while others go without even the bare necessities. We trash the planet. We misdirect our natural affections so that we exploit one another rather than nurturing one another. We fill up the time God has given us with trivialities and then find that we don't have time enough for God. *We waste our substance*. The story of the Incarnation is that God does not abandon His errant children to their own devices. He sends His own Son, His very Self, to bring us home at whatever cost.

**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.*

March 26<sup>th</sup>

Luke 15 vv 14-16

Discussing how difficult it is to make the necessary changes to our lifestyle in order to lessen global warming, they were talking about how living standards have risen down through the ages. In the past, improvement was very slow. Things were much the same at the time of the Norman Conquest as they had been a thousand years before in the time of the Roman Empire. In fact, in some ways they were worse. The Roman roads and aqueducts had been allowed to fall into disrepair. There was no Roman Peace enforced on a more or less willing Mediterranean world. Wealthy Romans had had central heating! Through the Middle Ages and the Tudor and Stuart eras, things very slowly got better, with slips back in times of plague, war or crop failure. Life was *nasty brutish and short* (Thomas Hobbes 1651). It was only at the end of the eighteenth century that the standard of living, first in Britain, then in Europe and North America, began rapidly to rise. We

industrialised agriculture. We industrialised the world. We burnt millions of tons of coal (which is almost pure carbon). Our lives became very much more secure and comfortable, longer even. Standards of living have continued to rise at least in the West ever since James Watt perfected the steam engine. But we have used up resources, generated more waste than we know what to do with and polluted the atmosphere with gases which cause respiratory illness as well as those which cause the temperature of the planet to rise with devastating effects on climate. How much are we willing to give up of the comforts of our contemporary lifestyles in order to save the planet? Is it fair to expect other much poorer countries than ours to go without the comforts of civilisation in order to keep down their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions?

As I was listening to this, I wondered what we really mean by standard of living? Is it how much stuff we've got, how comfortable we are, what opportunities we have (to work and travel for example) or is what really matters peace of mind? Are we happier than the Romans or the Normans or the Georgians? It's not really possible to say. I'm sure we shouldn't be happy if we lived in draughty, poorly heated huts, toiled long hours at heavy manual work, ate a limited and often insufficient diet, and lacked access to decent health care and dentistry. But they'd never known anything different. So perhaps they didn't mind as much as we would. Put it another way, would be happier still if we had more stuff than we've got now, had more opportunities for travel, less hard work to do and better medical services? Maybe – definitely the last. I don't think I'm any happier now than I was all those years ago when I'd never been abroad, we didn't have a car, a phone or central heating & home computers hadn't been invented.

But there seems to be so much unhappiness around, so much complaining and moaning and an apparent rise in the incidence of mental illness. Am I wrong in thinking that what people really lack is the knowledge of God? What human beings really need to do is to come home to their Heavenly Father. In Him all our hungers are satisfied. If we turned to God to have our needs met we might not be trashing the planet in a desperate attempt to quench our desires with things that can never satisfy our true needs.

March 27<sup>th</sup> (Lent 4 Mothering Sunday)

Luke 15 vv 17-19

The young man *came to himself*. The lost sheep didn't come to itself. The good shepherd just went looking for him. The lost coin didn't even know that it was lost, but the owner was desperate to find it. The human being *comes to himself*. God is like the shepherd seeking out the lost simply because He loves him. He is like the woman looking for the coin because He definitely doesn't want any of us to be lost. But the young man has free will. He takes stock and comes to himself. Don't individuals and the human race collectively need to *come to themselves*, to take stock and recognise that there is a lot wrong with their lives and that there is only one remedy?

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

March 28<sup>th</sup>

Luke 15 vv 20-24

When the young man came to himself, he recognised that he had done wrong. He had behaved foolishly and wickedly. Folly and wickedness are not far apart from one another, *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. The Hebrew word for repent is the same word as is used for turn or return שׁוּב The lad repents of his sin and stupidity. He returns to his father. And the response is not only to allow him to come home as a penitent allowed only to return on sufferance as a humble servant. The father meets him, greets him, welcomes him enthusiastically and restores him to his status as one of the family. And this, of course, is how God greets us when we come to ourselves.

March 29<sup>th</sup>

Luke 15 vv 25-32

The Sunday School teacher asked the class “Who wasn't pleased to see the prodigal son return?”. “Was it the fatted calf, Miss?” came the reply. Well, of course, it was the older brother. Don't we have sympathy for the older brother? He has every reason to feel unfairly treated. His younger sibling has taken a substantial proportion of the family capital and wasted it on riotous living while he has stayed at home and worked hard on the farm (possibly much harder without his brother to help). The older brother feels that he has been taken for granted by his father. Why should there be a party to celebrate the

return of the prodigal when nothing special has ever been done for him? I suspect that a lot of us might feel like this older brother. We've done our best in life, worked hard and perhaps not experienced much recognition of the fact. Doesn't it seem unfair when other people get all the adulation? And yet there is love. The father loves both sons. God the Father loves us all. We're called to love another. Given that Heaven rejoices over a sinner who repents, how can we do otherwise? If we grudge the restoration of people whose sins are more spectacular than our own, we are not behaving in the manner of our Father.

I was going to suggest that it was rational or reasonable to take the older brother's part. After all, the family business would have gone bankrupt if he too had been prodigal and wasted his share of the substance. I was going to suggest that our heads would share the older brother's view of the matter whereas our hearts should sympathise with the younger – head versus heart, reason versus emotion, calculation versus love, justice versus mercy..

But I realised that I would have been wrong. There is nothing unreasonable about love. Mercy and justice are two sides of the same coin – inseparably so. God is love. Jesus is the power and wisdom of God. He is the Word – the Logic of God. Wisdom and Love are one.

March 30<sup>th</sup> Luke 16 vv 1-18  
I struggle with this parable. Here are some thoughts. We are all stewards of God's world. We are responsible for using God's gifts responsibly. We're not to be unjust like the steward in the story. We're not to feather our own nests as he appears to have done. We are, however, to be shrewd. We're to put things right where they've gone wrong, not to protect ourselves but because we must give account to God of how we have used the things with which He has entrusted us for the common good. Being generous even to those who don't deserve our generosity we are, by God's grace, fitting ourselves for Heaven. Living in this world, we are required to be honest and industrious. Otherwise, why should people trust us with big things (heavenly things) as well as more minor things? If you steal from your employer, for example, why should he respect the faith which you profess? In the end, however, it is

God Whom we serve. If we love Him, we fulfil His Holy Law because keeping God's commandments is love in action.

March 31<sup>st</sup> Luke 16 vv 19-31  
This parable was the BCP Gospel for a Sunday just after the Grenfell Tower fire and seemed very apt. In Kensington, rich and poor live close together. There was an indifference to the safety of those living in tower blocks. Saving money on contracts took precedence over the welfare of the residents. Corners were cut.

But there will be a judgment. The poor will be vindicated. The rich who oppress the poor or who are indifferent to their plight will be punished. After the judgment it will be too late.

*But we didn't know* the sinners will say. Didn't we know? Don't we have consciences? Weren't we taught right from wrong at our mother's knee? Don't we have the Bible and the teaching of the Church?

*Are but*, the world might say, *We would have repented if one had risen from the dead.*