

St Leonard's, Glapthorn

Evening Prayer – Scripture Notes

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Today's readings are, again, from two books which are difficult in their own way. In relation to each, to save repetition, it may be worth looking back at the notes for last week.

Old Testament lesson: Jonah 3:10-4:11

The point about Jonah, as a prophet, is not so much his prophetic utterance (the sum total of which is to say to the people of Nineveh, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown') but what happens. The story so far is this: Jonah's initial disobedience, in not going to Nineveh; being saved from the turbulent sea by a giant fish; being saved from the fish by God; foretelling (without qualification) the destruction of Nineveh; and the repentance of the king and people of the city. So we reach today's reading. God decides not to destroy Nineveh after all. Jonah is furious – he takes this as a personal affront, as if his credibility is more important than the wellbeing of the 120,000 inhabitants of the city. Jonah then waits outside the city to see what will happen to it. God provides a bush to give him shade, which then withers. Jonah is more concerned about his personal comfort, which he had done nothing to secure, than the fate of Nineveh's people, who (God tells Jonah when rebuking him) were guilty of not much more than ignorance. The theological target here may be Israel's complacency and pride and its obligations towards the innocently ignorant surrounding nations.

New Testament lesson: Revelation 8:1-5

It is impossible adequately to introduce a reading from Revelation in a few short sentences. A good commentary is necessary in order to make any headway. So far as an angle of approach is concerned, the French writer, Paul Claudel, gave what might be a useful pointer when he said that our primary concern should not be to understand the book of Revelation but rather to walk inside it like one would walk in a cathedral and be led to fall on one's knees in awe and wonder and worship of God. Nonetheless, we do need to get some sort of idea of what is going on. The book, in the form of symbolic visions and fantastic imagery, presents as the heavenly disclosure of truth, concerned with the apparent contradiction between the universal sovereignty of God and the dominance of evil in the world. It is thick with reference to apocalyptic writings of the Old Testament, especially, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, and Daniel. We are confronted by the radical difference between God's view of reality and our own. There is hope by the fulfilment of God's plan, the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, but this is preceded by a titanic cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil and inescapable judgement. The hard edges of scripture are here: we will be held accountable and must, therefore, take responsibility. God has been seen in heaven with a scroll, on which is his plan for the cosmos. Only the slaughtered Lamb (Jesus) is worthy to break the seven seals with which it is secured. As each is opened, dread forces are unleashed. Today's reading depicts opening the last. There is a tense, expectant, primeval hush. Incense carries prayers up to the heavenly throne room. Trumpets stand in readiness, to herald the final conflict and judgement, which is presaged by ominous thunder, lightning, and earthquake.

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Jonah 3:1-9

The book of Jonah is most unusual. It may well have been intended to be funny. It is also distinctive in its favourable treatment of the pagan world. God orders Jonah to preach against the wicked city of Nineveh (near Mosul in modern Iraq). Jonah promptly gets on a boat and heads in exactly the opposite direction. There is then the famous story of his being swallowed

by an enormous fish and being saved by God after his prayer of praise and trust and promise to do better. God has another go and, this time, Jonah obeys. As we hear in today's reading, he preaches repentance and the people of Nineveh, including the king, change their wicked ways. As a result, to Jonah's annoyance, God changes his mind about destroying the city. Jonah's annoyance makes God cross with Jonah. The theological point may be this. Jonah stands for Israel and Nineveh stands for the surrounding nations. God uses the giant fish to save Jonah, despite his disobedience, from the forces of chaos (often depicted as turbulent water). When God decides not to destroy Nineveh, because its king and people have repented, Jonah's anger is due to his belief that God's mercy should not apply beyond Israel, but his wrath should. God, emphatically, puts Jonah right. God's merciful concern and compassion is universal.

New Testament lesson: Revelation 3:14-22

Because of its difficulty, and its having given rise to some decidedly whacky sects, there is a temptation to avoid getting to grips with Revelation. Having a good commentary is essential if one is to make head or tail of it and get some sort of handle on its multitude of seemingly bizarre references. The author is unknown. Scholarly opinion pretty much discounts earlier tradition that it was written by an apostle, or the author of the 4th gospel, or of the letters to which the name 'John' was ascribed (not least because, the author of Revelation, though he identifies himself, does not say that he was any of these). It can be seen as the second instalment of the prophecy of Daniel, consisting of visions disclosing, or unveiling, the resolution of history - a new creation, accomplishing God's plan of judgement and salvation. Today's reading is part of the address, at the dictation of a vision of the Son of Man (which is an expression used in Daniel 7:13 and by Jesus himself), to the seven churches of Asia Minor. The church in Laodicea is the last of these. Laodicea was known for its wealth, its textiles, its ointment for eyes, and its tepid, brackish water supply. Reference is made to each of them. Its works are lukewarm and distasteful. Its spiritual poverty demands the acquisition of 'gold refined by fire', idiomatic for the removal of sin. Spiritual clothing and ointment are needed to hide its spiritual nakedness and to cure its spiritual blindness. It must accept the risen Christ who stands knocking at its door and sit down with him at the Messianic banquet.

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: 2 Kings 6:8-23

The temptation, whenever reading a passage from Kings, is to recall Evelyn Waugh's description, in his first novel *Decline and Fall*, of morning assembly at the dreadful prep school Llanabba, when the appalling headmaster, Dr. Fagan, "*Advanced to the table at the end of the room, picked up a Bible, and opening it at random, read a chapter of blood-curdling military history without any evident relish.*" We can take the work of the Deuteronomistic historians a little more seriously. They were working after the return from the Babylonian exile, in the theological project of depicting the history of Israel, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and exile, in terms of the sovereignty of God and His commitment to the Jewish people. Today's reading again concerns Elisha's prophetic and miraculous ministry, here, in the context of war between Aram (in modern Syria) and Israel. An Aramean army is sent to kidnap Elisha, who has been able to forewarn Israelites of Aramean troop movements. As often in the bible, 'blindness' is used to imply a lack of perception as well as lost physical sight. Elisha is protected by an invisible heavenly host. The Aramean army is blinded and led by Elisha into the heart of the fortified city of Samaria. They could be slaughtered there but, instead, Elisha ensures that they are given a great feast and allowed to go home. This act of mercy and statesmanship secures lasting peace.

New Testament lesson: Acts 17:15-34

Paul is now in Athens, having been driven out of Macedonia by Jews from Thessalonica. Paul confronts philosophically sophisticated Greeks at the Areopagus, which could mean either Athens' governing assembly or the place where the assembly met. He is charged with

something similar to that which had caused the condemnation of Socrates: the proclamation of a new divinity, but there is no hint of danger to Paul – the sense is more that of philosophical curiosity, without partisan commitment. Paul, when preaching in synagogues has relied on reference to Hebrew scripture – our Old Testament. Luke presents him as preaching to Greeks in their own terms (whether Luke’s portrayal is consistent with Paul’s own accounts, in his letters, is a matter of controversy). Rather than condemn idolatry as the outright rejection of God, it is here characterised as a pale imitation of true worship, an indication of the impulse to seek God. By this, the Greeks’ ‘unknown God’ may be identified as the one God who created all things and, as creator, could not be the idolatrous creation of human minds and hands. The creator is said to command repentance, in the light of revelation which dispels earlier ignorance and in anticipation of a day of judgement when a resurrected man, anointed by God, will call creation to account for its use of the freedom granted to it. The speech has mixed success.

The Tenth Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: 2 Kings 4:1-37

The two books of Kings were originally one long work, divided for convenience by translators. With Samuel, Kings provides a continuous account of the development of the kingdom of Israel. Solomon has failed to secure an orderly succession. The kingdom has divided: Israel in the north; Judah in the south. The northern kingdom has descended into paganism, started by Jezebel’s introduction of the worship of Baal – against which Elija has struggled, with varying degrees of success. Elija ascends to heaven, Elisha picks up his mantle and then performs a series of miracles (establishing, as later with Jesus, his spiritual authority). Today’s reading describes the first of them: the abundant flow of oil; the birth and resurrection of the Shunammite woman’s son. Obvious parallels occur in the New Testament.

New Testament lesson: Acts 16:6-15

Paul and Barnabas continue their missionary journey through what is now Turkey. They are restrained by the ‘Holy Spirit’ and the ‘Spirit of Jesus’ – demonstrating that their actions are entirely under divine direction. Without any preamble or explanation, the story abruptly slips from the third person into the first person plural, ‘they’ becomes ‘we’. There is controversy as to whether this means that the author really did join Paul (the case that he did not being that Acts presents a rather different picture of Paul and his theology, than Paul himself does, in his letters). The missionaries sail from Troas (on the west coast of modern Turkey) to Macedonia, to preach the gospel for the first time in what is now Europe. On the Sabbath, by a river, they meet Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira (a centre of the dyeing industry). She is converted and all her household baptised. This story shows the leading role which could be played by a C1st woman in commerce and the church. The baptism of her whole household implies that infant baptism may have very early origins.

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: 1 Kings 11:41-12:20

This reading describes an important moment in Jewish history, as described by what are called the Deuteronomistic historians. These writers were working after the return from the Babylonian exile, in the context of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and, in particular, the Temple. The Deuteronomistic history was an intensely theological project – depicting the events of the preceding four centuries, with the central theological purpose of illuminating the destruction of Jerusalem and the following exile, in terms of the sovereignty of YHWH (the Lord). Today’s lesson opens with reference to *The Book of the Acts of Solomon*, a book now lost (indeed, which may never have existed) as containing a fuller account of the king’s reign. Solomon dies and is succeeded by his son, Rehoboam and, immediately, there is crisis involving long standing tensions in the kingdom, which had been uneasily united by Solomon’s father, David. Solomon

had ruled from Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, but had imposed heavy obligations on the northern tribes. Now he was dead, the north wanted a better deal. The northern tribes found a champion in Jeroboam, who had returned from Egypt, where he had fled after an unsuccessful rebellion. Instead of compromise, Rehoboam ignores the advice of Solomon's old counsellors and, egged on by young hot-heads, gets even tougher with the north. As a result, the north rebels, Rehoboam flees to Jerusalem and Jeroboam is proclaimed king of the north. The kingdom is again divided between southern Judah and northern Israel.

New Testament lesson: Acts 14:8-20

The reading from Acts continues the account of Paul's first missionary journey with Barnabas. They have reached Lystra in Anatolia (now part of modern Turkey). This is the first time that they are among people who are entirely gentile. Any account of Jesus in terms of continuity with Judaism and the fulfilment of Hebrew scripture would be pointless. The people interpret a healing miracle as an indication that Barnabas and Paul are, respectively, the gods Zeus and Hermes (interestingly, they thought that, though Paul was the chief speaker, Barnabas was pre-eminent). Things get out of hand when the local priest of Zeus arranges an elaborate ritual sacrifice to them. Paul and Barnabas counter this with the conventional Jewish critique of gentile idolatry: they are mere human beings with the message that people should turn from worthless idols to the living God, who created all things and continually provides for material and spiritual needs. However, some Jews arrive and turn the crowds against them. Paul is stoned and left for dead. But he is somehow saved by other disciples and he and Barnabas get away.

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: 1 Kings 10:1-13

This is the famous visit to Solomon by the queen of Sheba, Makeda. It is often overlooked that the Queen, hearing of Solomon's fame, comes to test him with hard questions. It may be that Solomon's access to a port in the Gulf of Aqaba had disrupted trade from which she had benefited and she wished to negotiate a commercial treaty. This story is part of the Deuteronomistic (second law) history, written after the return from Babylonian exile but describing the time before it. The authors wished both to emphasise Solomon's immense wealth and wisdom and to attribute these to YHWH's (the Lord's) election of Israel, with Solomon as its king, and to Solomon's faithfulness and piety. The queen of Sheba finds her breath taken away by the opulence of Solomon's court, his religious observance, wisdom, and justice. She showers him with gifts. Ethiopian tradition has it that he gave her a son, Menelik, and that Ethiopia's royal house was descended from their union. You may recall that Haile Selassie referred to himself as the 'Lion of Judah' and claimed to be the 225th emperor of the Solomon-Makeda royal line.

New Testament lesson: Acts 13:1-13

Last week, we saw how Peter, after his miraculous escape from prison, simply disappears from the story told by Luke in Acts. By this reading, the focus switches to Paul (who is called 'Saul' in verse 1, but by verse 13 is being called 'Paul'). The Holy Spirit inspires a whole, newly formed community of Jesus-followers in Antioch to commission Paul to set off on his first missionary journey to Cyprus (together with Barnabas who was from that island). At first, they preach in the synagogues of the Jewish diaspora there (showing that, initially, the mission was to Jews and that the Jesus movement had not separated from Judaism). The confrontation with the magician in Paphos, then the capital, is typical of Luke's concern with the conflict between God and Satan. It results in defeat for the dark spiritual forces - the magician is temporarily made blind. This unmistakably echoes St Paul's Damascus experience but what lasting effect it has is left unexplored - we may ask whether the description of the magician 'groping for someone to lead him by the hand' stands for a new search by him for spiritual truth. The already sympathetic Roman Proconsul is converted by what he saw. After this, Paul and his companions set off for Perga, in what is now southern Turkey.

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: 1 Kings 6:11-14, 23-28

Solomon obeys the Lord's instructions for the building of the first Jerusalem Temple, the specifications for which are set out in meticulous detail. However, our reading begins by making it clear that the building itself is not the paramount element of the Lord's relationship with Israel: The Lord says that He will dwell among, and sustain, the people on condition that they keep the law. In a passage which the Lectionary omits, the inner sanctuary is lined and floored with costly cedar and cypress, there are intricate carvings of gourds and flowers, and the extensive use of gold. The reading then describes huge olive wood cherubim, each about 15' tall and 15' wide from wingtip to wingtip. These creatures seem to derive from Canaanite-Phoenician religious tradition and to have been an amalgam of the animal, human, and angelic and to draw on ideas of cherubim supporting God's throne with the ark of the covenant as God's footstool.

New Testament lesson: Acts 12:1-17

After the events described in this passage, Peter simply disappears from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, with no information as to where he went or what happened to him. His last recorded act is, in effect, to acknowledge James, the brother of Jesus, as a leading figure in the Jerusalem community of Jesus followers. The reading begins with another James, the brother of John, being killed on the orders of Herod Agrippa – the grandson of the Herod of the nativity stories – who then has Peter arrested. Peter's miraculous escape, the night before he is due to be executed, has a number of echoes of the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. In relation to birth, there is the involvement of a Herod and the appearance of an angel. In relation to the culmination of Jesus' earthly life, the incident takes place at Passover. Peter is arrested because Herod thinks it will please the Jerusalem mob. Peter transcends earthly injustice and the use of brute force. The discovery that he is alive and free is first made by a woman and the other disciples are initially incredulous.

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

1 Kings 2.10-12, 3:16-28

The books of Kings are in the sequence of the Old Testament 'history' books. The conquest of the Promised Land is described in Joshua. Judges then gives an account of Israel's descent into political, religious, and moral corruption. The institution of the monarchy is described by the books of Samuel. Kings give an account of the kingdom, from the death of David, to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile.

There is something a bit 'Arthurian' about King David. The view of the great Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, is that in David, 'we have an historically rooted memory of a tribal chieftain, of quite modest proportion, whose memory has been greatly enhanced through artistic imagination'.

Today's reading, set by the Lectionary, omits some of the less comfortable details of the story. Before it begins, David – on his deathbed – has advised his son Solomon to murder his rivals. The following passage, which the set reading leaves out, describes Solomon doing just that. It also omits the dream in which Solomon asks for and is granted wisdom. The reading then picks up with an illustration of that wisdom. Solomon adjudicates between the two prostitutes who both claim to be the mother of the same baby. Later, Solomon, in the antithesis of wisdom, will follow other gods and it will all go horribly wrong.

Today's lesson from Acts has to be read in the context of Luke's account of the spectacular healing of the man who had been lame from birth – healing which is expressed in terms of both physical healing and spiritual salvation. The Sadducees (who did not believe in resurrection) are the ideal foil for the apostles' preaching about the resurrection of Jesus. They are

instrumental in the arrest of Peter and John and having them appear before the Sanhedrin. Asked “by what power or by what name” they had healed the man (who is actually present). Peter answers, “filled with the Holy Spirit” (so not the Peter of the triple denial), quoting psalm 118:22, associating Jesus with the rejected stone, which became the cornerstone, bearing the entire weight of a structure. By this, Peter confronts the authority of the establishment which was responsible for Jesus’ death. The resurrected Christ is the source of salvation (the cornerstone) and is shown to be the true source of power and authority. The Sanhedrin, after some bluster, let the apostles go.

Acts 4.1-22

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The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: 2 Samuel 7:18-29

The Old Testament lesson is David’s prayer. The setting for it is that David has driven the Jebusites out of Jerusalem (now called ‘The City of David’) and brought to it the ark of the covenant (containing the 10 commandment tablets) and famously danced before the Lord with all his might (which, many years ago, I saw wonderfully depicted by Duke Ellington and the tap dancer Bunny Briggs at Great St Mary’s church in Cambridge: I have posted a version of this https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dD3GP_0qoNg). David (through the prophet Nathan) has asked God whether he should build a house for the ark. God replies that is a job for his offspring and, rather, He – God – will create an indestructible house for David, in the form of a perpetual dynasty (hence the significance of Joseph being of ‘David’s house and line’). David then expresses in prayer his praise and adoration, extolling the pre-eminence of Israel and its God.

New Testament lesson: Luke 18:31-19:10

In the first part of today’s gospel reading, Jesus has approached but not entered Jerusalem – the city of David. He has wept over it. Luke’s attitude to Jerusalem is complex and ambivalent. There is a sense here of the consequences to unbelieving Israel and anticipation of the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70AD, which for Luke, would have been a raw and recent memory. Luke’s gospel begins and ends with focus on the Temple. His short account of its ‘cleansing’ and the challenge to Jesus’ authority as he teaches there, may serve to emphasise Jesus’ taking over the epicentre of Jewish religious observance from the religious and secular authorities who were inhibiting the fulfilment of God’s plan for Israel and the world.

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: 2 Samuel 2:1-11; 3:1

The book of Judges (which comes just before Samuel) describes Israel's descent into corruption (political, religious, and moral) after the reign of Joshua. Samuel is called by God to sort out the mess caused by the house of Eli. Samuel is a judge who determines disputes, he also is a religious, secular, and military leader. After years of success on all fronts, he hands over to his sons who promptly squander his achievements. The people demand a king (to be like the surrounding nations). YHWH reluctantly agrees. Samuel anoints Saul (a Messiah – anointed for the redemption of the people). After initial success, it ends in tears. Saul becomes a poor king (trying, as a result of jealousy, to kill the militarily successful David). Today's reading comes just after the death of Saul and his son, Jonathan (and David's famous resulting elegy). David (advised by YHWH to go to Hebron in the southern kingdom of Judah) is acclaimed and anointed there as king by "*the people of Judah*". Saul's family do not want to hand over the monarchy to Saul's enemy and one of Saul's commanders makes a surviving son of Saul king of the northern kingdom of Israel – without YHWH's authority. The scene is set for a long (essentially, civil) war in which David gradually gains the upper hand.

New Testament lesson: Luke 18:31-19:10

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem via Jericho. To his disciples, he predicts his betrayal, suffering, death, and resurrection for the third time. The importance of faith and discernment is emphasised by the healing of the blind beggar (who, though he cannot see, correctly perceives Jesus' true nature). In Jericho, to the outrage of onlookers, Jesus chooses to stay with Zacchaeus, a tax collector (hated because of his dishonesty and collaboration with the Roman occupation). Zacchaeus is transformed by the encounter. Jesus' mission is universal and includes those who have chosen to put themselves outside their community. The last verse summarises the whole purpose of Jesus' ministry: "*For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost*".

Friday 3rd July

St Thomas, the Apostle

Old Testament lesson: Job 38:1-21

I have brought forward the passage in the book of Job, where God finally responds to Job's anguished cries of physical and psychological pain. Job has been asking God to explain and justify his undeserved suffering. God turns the tables by demanding to know from Job what he understands about the deep nature of the cosmos. God answers his own questions with a dismissively sarcastic comment, which conveys the inadequacy of human comprehension, when set against God's limitless sovereignty, wisdom, and creativity.

If you want to know what happens in the end, have a look at the last chapter of the book, Ch.42, where the form reverts from poetry to prose. Is it a happy ending? And what questions, if any, are answered?

New Testament lesson: John 20:24-29

Thomas has doubted what his fellow disciples have told him about their encounter with the risen Christ. Again, Jesus appears in a locked room but is not a ghost. Although Jesus invites Thomas touch him, there is no description of his doing so – perhaps, to make the point that to do was unnecessary for Thomas to proclaim Jesus as God (as John had said that he was in the very first verse of the Gospel). On the door of our fridge, is a magnetic copy of an installation by the American artist, Barbara Kruger. It says, *BELIEF + DOUBT = SANITY*.

Thursday 2nd July 2020

The Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Old Testament lesson: Job 30

Having looked back at his ideal life of both prosperity and service of others, Job again turns to his predicament: the contempt in which he is held. He laments that God has removed his means of defence, enabling the rabble to torment him, without restraint. For the first time since Ch.16, he addresses God directly, anguished that his cries, against what he sees as God's cruelty, go unanswered. Having, in the previous chapter, recalled his apogee, here, he depicts the trauma of his humiliating ostracism. His psychological pain seems to be more excruciating than his physical suffering.

New Testament lesson: Romans 13:1-7

This is one of, if not the most, contentious passages in Paul's letters. On the face of it, Paul says that everyone must submit to secular authorities, because they have been instituted by God. It means obedience to secular rulers, including paying all the taxes demanded by them. This seems hard to square with what Paul says elsewhere (even a little earlier in Romans at 12:2) and even harder to square with ideas of justified resistance to tyranny. We are again confronted with the demands of discernment and the desirability of reading round the subject. Some argue that it is implicit that Paul is not saying that someone must obey all secular authorities, in all circumstances. Others say that Paul's point was that a monotheistic God would want there to be secular authorities (to secure order and human flourishing), ultimately answerable to Himself. However, Paul is speaking not of theoretical authorities, but 'those authorities that exist' and goes on to say, explicitly, that those particular authorities 'have been instituted by God' and must not be resisted. One approach might be to think that Paul was addressing a specific situation - which is, at this distance of time, irrecoverable, but may have had to do with wishing to avoid the power of the Roman state being turned against the vulnerable community of Jesus-followers in Rome, as actually happened very shortly afterwards. Perhaps, we should pause before deploying this passage in relation to any contemporary controversy.

Wednesday, 1 July 2020

Commemoration: Three generations of the Venn family: Henry, John, and Henry Venn – who died respectively in 1797, 1813 and 1873. They were evangelical Anglican priests and leading personalities in the Clapham Sect and the movement to abolish the Atlantic slave trade.

NB: The reference I give, in the introduction, to the Sermon on the Mount, should, of course, be to Matthew 5:44 (not 5:54).

Old Testament lesson: Job 29

After the reflection on wisdom, from outside the drama of the responses to Job's innocent suffering, the voice of Job is heard again. He recounts and longs for his earlier, ideal life. Job's self-understanding is rich with images drawn from Royal categories of circumstance and action. Job does not only describe his own situation, before disasters struck, but also his performance of kingly obligations towards the poor and needy. The images symbolise the vitality with which he went about meeting human need, rather than sitting about pontificating like his false comforters.

New Testament lesson: Romans 12:9-21

We have seen how it could be said that Paul's chief preoccupations were, firstly, to show that Gentiles could, by faith, inherit the promises made by God to Abraham and, secondly, the implications of that inheritance in relation to how they should live. Our readings from Romans have taken us into what Paul had to say about the second. Mutual love is at the heart of his exhortations to promote human flourishing, countering selfish pride and creating unity. He is primarily concerned with how members of the community of Jesus-followers should

behave towards each other, but he also touches on relations between that community and those outside it. It is often observed how little, if at all, Paul refers to the life and teaching of Jesus. Here, there is an exception. His reference to blessing one's persecutors, seems to echo Matthew 5:44, from the Sermon on the Mount.

Tuesday 30th June

Old Testament lesson: Job 28

This fascinating reflection on the nature of Wisdom is not in the voice of any of the named protagonists in the book, human or heavenly. It is, rather, an authoritative commentary from outside the drama of Job's suffering and the resulting interactions. It begins by remarking on human ingenuity, being able to detect, and then extract from underground, minerals and jewels. Wisdom, however, is both more precious and harder to find. Wisdom is presented as integral to the created order of the cosmos (not unlike the 'Word', or *logos*, in the prologue to John's Gospel) but it can only be properly apprehended with God's help, the result being to stand in awe of (or to 'fear') God, spurning evil being the sign that this has been understood.

Romans 12:1-8

Having set out, at length and with much complexity, his reasons for saying that Gentiles may, by faith, inherit the promises made by God to Abraham, Paul turns to the practical consequences of this for his mainly Gentile readers in Rome. Participation in the death of Christ is extended into the idea of Jesus-followers, as acts of worship, presenting their bodies as living sacrifices. Transformed (earlier expressed as resurrection, after death of the old self), they will be able to discern the will of God and act accordingly. Paul urges humility and a recognition that different capabilities will determine the roles to be played by different people, within the unity of the body of Christ, likening them to the various functions of different parts of the human body.

Monday 29th June

Feast of St Peter, the Apostle

Old Testament lesson: Ezekiel 34:11-16

The priestly Ezekiel was among those exiled to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 597 BC. It is likely that he never, thereafter, left Babylon. In a series of bizarre visions, the fall of Jerusalem is attributed to the sins of the people. Later, restoration (the return of the people and the rebuilding of the temple) is anticipated. Today's reading is from this latter section of the book, coming shortly before the famous vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. Deploying the metaphor of Israel as a flock and its leaders as shepherds, Ezekiel, speaking for the Lord, launches a blistering oracle against those leaders. Because they have abused their power and the sheep had been scattered, the Lord must Himself take on the role of shepherd, gathering them up and restoring them. The image of God, or a secular ruler, as a good shepherd was common in the Ancient Near East.

New Testament lesson: John 21:15-22

Chapter 21 of John's Gospel is generally thought to be a late addition. It may be that the gospel's final editor wished to establish the authority of Peter. After the miraculous catch of fish and breakfast, the effect of Peter's earlier threefold denial is vitiated by a threefold affirmation of love, paired with a fresh commission expressed in terms of shepherding sheep. That Jesus addresses Peter by his original name, 'Simon', is an indication that the relationship had needed to be reset. Jesus then foretells Peter's martyrdom (earlier, in Ch.10, Jesus has described how the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep). Peter asks about the status of the

enigmatic, unnamed ‘beloved disciple’. Jesus, in effect, tells Peter that is not his concern. Peter’s duty is simply to follow Jesus.

Friday 26th June

Old Testament lesson: Job 25-26

Bildad starts to lecture Job about the way in which God has overcome conflict in heaven (a feature of many Ancient Near Eastern myths) and asks, in the light of that, how any human beings could be righteous before him. Job interrupts him with, by now familiar, sarcasm. From the words ‘The shades below’, the mood seems to shift completely and it may be that, without it being flagged in the text, Bildad is speaking again. Whoever is speaking says that God’s awesome purity and power keeps the heavens free from revolt and overcomes those representatives of cosmic chaos: the turbulent waters and the sea-monster, Rahab.

New Testament lesson: Romans 11:13-24

Of the reading from Romans, it could be said that Paul is having difficulty holding together his belief in God’s election of Israel and his belief in salvation by faith in Jesus. Here, he argues that Israel has stumbled, but not completely fallen, and that very stumbling has given the opportunity to Gentiles to show the way, causing such jealousy in Israel, that it will turn to Christ. By this, Gentiles have priority over Jews in timing, but both are part of the same salvation history and heading, ultimately, in the same direction. Paul deploys the famous image of the cultivated olive tree, likening Israel to branches which have been pruned from it, and Gentiles to wild olive branches which have been grafted onto what remains, to be transformed (made ‘holy’) by its roots. He then extends the metaphor to the anticipation that God can graft faithful Jews back onto the tree. The weakness of this metaphor is that it is horticultural nonsense. A grafted scion retains all its own characteristics (the only difference being that of vigour). But we can see what Paul is getting at, and it has to do with the participation of Gentiles in God’s plan for Israel. He is not proposing a blueprint for individual salvation or the invention of a new religion called ‘Christianity’. Few of us, today, share Paul’s anxiety about the dilemma which so preoccupied him. Krister Stendahl, theologian, Lutheran bishop, and wise old bird, wrote this: ‘Do not worry too much about relevance. It doesn’t seem to us to be a major problem that the Gentiles should be in on God’s plan. To us that seems relatively unnecessary to argue for fifteen chapters. A greedy hunger for relevance often blinds the eyes of preachers and theologians.’

Thursday 25th June

Old Testament lesson: Job 23

Job’s friend Eliphaz has told Job that God, having no need which human beings could satisfy, does not benefit from anyone’s righteousness and accused Job of exploiting his wealth and position, in his family and society. He has also urged Job to put his life in order, value God instead of possessions, and submit to God’s instruction and will. The irony cannot be lost on the reader, who knows that these allegations are preposterous. In today’s reading, Job ignores them. Although, as we have seen, he has lost confidence in the moral order, Job cannot give up the idea that if only he could find God and put his case to him, he would be vindicated. On top of his physical afflictions, he suffers the psychological trauma of searching for God in vain, and being utterly unable to evoke a response. Terrified, he wants simply to vanish.

New Testament lesson: Romans 10:11-21

An approach which might be taken to today’s reading is this. Paul is concerned about his mission – he is going to Rome, on his way to Spain, hoping that he will be able to persuade members of the Roman community, which had not been founded by him, to support him. He is concerned about his mission, in the context of God’s plan for the world, amazed and dismayed that the news about Jesus has gained greater acceptance amongst Gentiles than

Jews. As always, he wants to establish that Gentiles can, by belief in Jesus, inherit the promises made by God to Abraham. In this passage, it is especially noticeable that he argues the case entirely by reference to Israel's own scripture. Therefore, Paul does not reject the authority of what we call the Old Testament, he actively relies on it. As a trained Pharisee, he would be well aware that scripture contains within it the means of continual self-criticism. Paul is saying (specifically in relation to Gentile inclusion) what the great independent prophets of the Old Testament repeatedly said to Israel: 'You have the law, but you do not live up to it.' Do not be surprised, however, if, when you look at a commentary, some very different analysis is suggested.

Wednesday, 24th June

The Nativity of Saint John the Baptist

Old Testament lesson: Malachi 4

Malachi (which means 'my messenger') may well have been written in a time of disillusionment, after the return from the Babylonian exile – the people had returned from captivity and the temple had been rebuilt but the ideal age seemed not to have arrived. The emphasis is on sin, repentance, and a day of reckoning, when the evil doers and the righteous will receive their just deserts. Today's reading looks forward to the last of these. Importantly, these are the last words of the Christian Old Testament. The prophet looks forward to the return of Elijah (who, according to 2 Kings 2:11, had not died but had been taken up into heaven, through a whirlwind, in a chariot of fire). Thus, for Christians, this passage stands as the bridge between the law and the prophets and the coming of the Elijah-like figure of John the Baptist, to proclaim the coming of the Messianic age. Thus, the story of Jesus can be seen in profound continuity with the traditions of Israel.

New Testament lesson: Matthew 11:2-19

John the Baptist has been arrested, by order of Herod, because he had been saying that Herod should not have left his wife to marry Herodias, his sister-in-law. From prison, the Baptist sends to Jesus the question to which the whole of the New Testament is directed: Who are you? Jesus' reply, by reference to a list of fulfilled prophecies, leaves no doubt: he is the Messiah. It is in that context, Jesus tells people about John, pointing to his likeness to Elijah, and saying that he is even more than a prophet – he proclaims the turning point in salvation history. Both the Baptist and Jesus are then presented as different expressions of God's wisdom, who – although their deeds are in fulfilment of the purposes of God, initiated by the law and the prophets – are misunderstood and rejected.

Tuesday 23rd June

Lesser Festival: Etheldreda, daughter and wife of Saxon kings, Abbess and founder of the double monastery, for monks and nuns, at Ely, dec'd 679.

Old Testament lesson: Job 21

Job, having railed against his undeserved suffering, now turns his fire on the related phenomenon: that the wicked not only seem to escape punishment but actually flourish, living long, prosperous, peaceful lives, having happy families, with multitudes of ancestors and descendants, and being honoured in death. In the face of this, all his friends can do, in the attempt to comfort him, is to mouth empty falsehoods.

New Testament lesson: Romans 9:19-33

Today's reading from Romans exemplifies the dangers inherent in reading a snippet of an epistle, out of context. Paul is developing the theme of God's sovereignty, likening God to a potter who uses the same lump of clay to make some objects for destruction - to demonstrate his wrathful power and the riches of his glory to others who have been made for salvation.

Taken on its own, this plainly means that God has predestined some human beings for damnation and others for salvation – and there is nothing that either can do about it. But he also speaks of attaining righteousness (meaning, here, something like the salvation contained in God’s promises to Abraham) by faith. But, it may be asked, does not faith require at least something from the believer – if only an intentional opening of the heart to the grace which is on offer? If so, where does that leave predestination? Paul cites Isaiah’s reference to only ‘a remnant’ being saved. However, later in 11:26, he says that ‘all Israel will be saved’. Acres of print have been devoted to these questions and it may be readily understood why I have repeatedly suggested recourse to private study with the help of commentaries. There is no escaping that this is exceptionally difficult.

Monday, 22nd June

Lesser Festival: Alban, by tradition, the first Martyr of Britain, who, according to the Venerable Bede, was beheaded during the Diocletian persecution, in the early 300s, for sheltering and saving a Christian priest.

Old Testament lesson: Job 19

Having heard no adequate explanation for his undeserved suffering, Job’s philippic against his friends, and God, achieves new levels of intensity. He describes a social, moral, and physical order which has been turned upside down: he has been stripped of his honour, as well as his wealth; his friends are now his enemies; he is alienated from his family; his servants disobey him; his bones cling to his body, rather than the other way about. V.25 is familiar to us from Handel’s *Messiah*: ‘I know that my redeemer liveth’. However, Charles Jennens, who assembled the biblical texts for the oratorio, had not understood that ‘redeemer’, here, means ‘avenger’. Job was referring to a convention that, if someone had been wronged, his nearest male relative would intervene to avenge the wrong. For Job, the hope of justice has given way to hope of revenge – that, at the last, he would see God face to face, on his side, when revenge is exacted on his behalf, on the basis of an indelible record of the injustice done to him.

New Testament lesson: Romans 9:1-18

After the rhetorical heights of the concluding verses of Romans 8, we come down with something of a bump. Paul seems to be returning to his central theme of how God’s promises to Abraham may be inherited; his point being that it was not by genetic descent, but by God’s election. Again, these are deep, contested waters, and reference to one or more commentaries would be helpful. Paul points out that God chose the younger sons of both Abraham and Isaac (namely Isaac and Jacob), instead of their older brothers, Ishmael and Esau. By this, Paul explained why, in his view, much of Israel was cut off from God, while Gentile believers were not. However, he also says that God’s election is entirely by the exercise of his sovereign will, irrespective of human intentions or effort. This apparent tension, in terms of salvation, between God’s inscrutable election and the exercise of free will by human beings has been an enduring source of controversy.

Friday, 19 June 2020

Commemoration: Sundar Singh of India, Sadhu (holy man), Evangelist and Missionary, who disappeared in Tibet in 1929

Old Testament lesson: Job 17:3-16

Job offers his life as surety, attempting to gain the opportunity to establish his innocence. The deep irony, known to the reader, is that his innocence is utterly irrelevant. His virtue and his suffering are completely unconnected. He calls his friends back to confront his predicament. All he has to look forward to is his death, which is being hastened by his afflictions. Sheol, to which Job refers, is not life after death, but the place of the dead, where

they exist only as shadowy spirits, irrespective of virtue in life. There can be, for Job, no consolation in the hope of a heavenly afterlife. It is sometimes overlooked that this is the predominant view in the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, in which there is only one clear reference to resurrection, judgement, and afterlife: Daniel 12:2. It is widely accepted that the book of Daniel, though it depicts events during the 6th BC Babylonian exile, was actually completed some 400 years later, during the Maccabean Revolt. That it pointed to an afterlife, may have had to do with the sense that those who had been killed in the revolt could not have died in vain and without ultimate reward.

New Testament lesson: Romans 8:18-30

This reading is too wonderful to miss. As it is set by the Lectionary for tomorrow, I have brought it forward to today. Right from the very start, Paul has been a controversial figure – we read, in Acts and Paul’s own letters, about the rows amongst the very earliest followers of Jesus, with Paul in the thick of them. And so it has continued. However, whatever view one takes of the criticisms of, for example, his personality, logic, consistency, acceptance of secular authority, and attitude to the status of women, he was undoubtedly capable of sublime flights of inspirational religious expression. This reading is one of them.

The contrast between Job and Romans could hardly be clearer. Yet the Lectionary has, for some days, been taking us through them, placing them side by side. Something to think about.

Thursday, 18th June

[Commemoration] **Bernard Mizeki, Apostle of the MaShona; Martyred on this day in 1896 during the Matabele Uprising.**

Old Testament lesson: Job 16:1-17:2

Job accuses his friends of vacuous, windy, rhetoric – autopilot responses to his unwarranted agony. His lament is of exquisite intensity. God has given him up to his persecutors. He is the victim of appalling violent crime, who cries out for justice and for a heavenly witness to speak for him to God – but he cries in vain.

New Testament lesson: Romans 8:12-17

I will not repeat what I said yesterday about Romans 8. The notes can easily be found on Facebook, YouTube, and the Glaphorn Church website. In that wider context, today’s short reading contains a number of familiar themes: the ‘flesh’, which can be seen as the old self; the liberation which may be secured by participating in the sufferings of Christ; and Paul’s central concern of securing the acceptance of Gentiles in the Jesus-movement so as to inherit the promises of God.

Tuesday, 16th June

Lesser Festival: Richard, Bishop of Chichester, dec’d 1253

Commemoration: Joseph Butler, Bishop of Durham, dec’d 1752

Old Testament lesson: Job 14

Job continues his submission to God, in the context of his demolition of the explanations offered by his friends for his undeserved suffering. He describes life as short and miserable. Even felled trees can put out new branches but for humanity death is final. Even mighty mountains are inexorably reduced by the action of water. God does the same to mortals, destroying their hope. The dead lie in Sheol, isolated and miserable.

New Testament lesson: Romans 7:7-25

To describe Romans 7 as a challenge is an understatement. It has been described as the key to Paul's theology. It has also been said that Paul was not a systematic theologian at all and was given to inconsistent theological statements, because he was always writing, from his own circumstances, to the specific situation of those to whom his letters were addressed. The problem might be this. Paul, the trained Pharisee, never quite let go of his loyalty to the twin pillars of Judaism: the promises made by God to Abraham and the law given to Moses at interminable length in Deuteronomy. But he also believed that salvation was only available through faith in Christ. How could he reconcile the two ideas, given that he also believed that God was in control of history and had intended both? So, in today's reading, we have both the idea that God gave the law to be an agent of sin and, in what may be an immediate *volte face*, as if he realised that this would not do, an assertion of what is called anthropological dualism – the idea of a spiritually good mind in a sinful body. I should repeat my encouragement to look at one or more of the readily available commentaries. One possible question which might occur to you, but only one of many, in this deeply contested area, is whether Paul, in this passage, tied himself in knots, trying to reconcile irreconcilable ideas, in relation to issues of little relevance to contemporary Christians.

Monday, 15th June

The church commemorates: Evelyn Underhill, Anglo-Catholic mystic, theologian, pacifist, and novelist, dec'd 15.6.41.

Old Testament lesson: Job 13

Job has excoriated the arguments of his friends, in seeking to explain his undeserved suffering, accusing them of killing wisdom by their inept, hypocritical, inadequate appeals to revelation, deduction, and ancestral tradition. In today's reading, he is, again, scathing about what they have said and, using the language of the law court, says that he intends to go further and take his case to God himself. He expresses fear for his life in doing so. He then addresses God, asking for two things – that God will let him speak and that God will answer him.

New Testament lesson: Romans 7:1-6

The difficulty of this short passage is in inverse proportion to its length. It begins with an analogy between a woman's freedom to remarry after her husband's death and the freedom from sin after participating in the death and resurrection of Christ. Even if one has reservations about the logic of this analogy, Paul is extending the important point we have already seen about death of the old self and being raised to new life. By this, believers together participate in Christ's death and resurrection and are changed. The old life ('living in the flesh') involved slavery to sin (which Paul, with startling hyperbole, says was 'aroused by the law'). Freed from that bondage, new life consists of mutual indwelling on the part of believers with each other and with Christ. From this the fruits of righteous conduct flow.

Friday 12th June 2020

Old Testament lesson: Job 11

Job has complained at great length, and with dramatic poetic eloquence, about his undeserved suffering and his inability to secure justice before a God who is both prosecutor and judge. His friend, Zophar the Naamathite, now enters the debate. He cannot let go of the inadequate, traditional idea of divine reward and punishment. He criticises Job's prolixity and says that, if God expressed himself, revealing the depth of His inscrutable wisdom and sovereign character, Job would realise that he had suffered even less than he deserves. According to Zophar, Job has focused too much on his conduct and, by prayer, he needs to reorientate his heart towards God and, thereby, regain confidence and hope.

New Testament lesson: Romans 6:1-14

I should begin with the usual note of caution. So much of what Paul wrote is difficult and contested and, to gain fuller understanding, one would need to look further than these thumbnail introductions. In today's reading, Paul is addressing the question, how the Gentiles and Jews, who are the heirs to the promises made by God to Abraham, should behave. He develops the idea of the relationship between sinful conduct and the radical, personal change wrought by the operation of faith and grace. He seems to saying something like this. The believer may participate in Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection – this involves the death (initiated by baptism) of the sinful old self and resurrection to new life, united with Christ and freed from the power of sin. This is accomplished by grace, something which mere compliance with the law cannot, by itself, achieve.

Thursday, 11th June 2020

The Feast of Saint Barnabas, the Apostle

Old Testament lesson: Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

Like Job, Ecclesiastes is one of the 'wisdom' books in the Old Testament. And, like Job, it stands in apparent tension with more generally expressed Old Testament faith. It raises the question of the distinction between contradiction and creative dialectic. The form is that of an extended monologue by 'the Teacher'. In general, the tone is that of largely pessimistic resignation, in the face of the implacable hardship of life and the inscrutability of the purposes of a sovereign God. Some readers will find in today's reading (which is the epilogue) that, at the last, the Teacher reverts to a conventional understanding of God, in accordance with which the preceding pessimism should be understood. Others may find, within Ecclesiastes itself, a creative dialectic of someone, towards the end of life, confronting the unresolved conflicts and troubled restlessness experienced in a life of faith.

New Testament lesson: Acts 9:26-31

On St Barnabas' day, the reading from Acts tells the story of Barnabas introducing Paul to the members of the Jesus-movement in Jerusalem. We have been told that Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus, had given the apostles the proceeds of sale of a field and they had changed his name from 'Joseph to Barnabas', meaning 'son of encouragement' [Acts 4:36-7]. His role in today's account is to overcome the refusal of the apostles to accept Paul, because they doubted his sincerity. Paul has already had a narrow escape in Damascus, where there had been a plot to kill him, and he had taken a risk in coming to Jerusalem. His bold teaching there provokes another plot, this time by some Greek-speaking Jews. Paul is saved from them, and escapes to his home city of Tarsus, *via* Caesarea. The persecutor has become the persecuted. Later, Barnabas will support Paul in the controversy about circumcision and will accompany Paul on his travels [Acts 11:22-15:35], before separating after a blazing row [Acts 15:36-41].

Wednesday 10th June

Old Testament lesson: Job 9

Bildad's rhetorical question, 'Does God pervert justice?' is rich with irony, as the reader, knows that Job is, indeed, entirely innocent. Job responds with ironic apparent agreement, which is followed by a blistering exploration of what is at the heart of the problem of innocent suffering: if there is only one God, everything evil, as well as everything good, must be attributed to him. Job deploys expansive imagery, of the sort conventionally used to praise God, not to extol but to criticise. How can Job achieve justice? God is not only unimaginably powerful, but is – in legal terms – both prosecutor and judge. As there is no independent arbitrator, it is impossible to secure justice, destroying trust in the moral order of the cosmos.

New Testament lesson: Romans 5:1-11

The gobblets of Paul's letters, prescribed by the Lectionary, can cause real difficulty. I have already encouraged reference to one or more of the widely available commentaries. It is not just the lack of context, Paul uses expressions of which there are no exact equivalents in English and when he gets into his stride, blazing away with rhetorical grapeshot, he can be inconsistent. As a pointer for today's short reading, it may be worth holding these ideas in mind. At its most simply stated, Paul was concerned to answer two questions. How could Gentiles participate with Jews in the saving promises made by God to Abraham? And, how should such Jews and Gentiles behave? He has already answered the first question: by faith, through grace. In relation to the second, he develops here, and elsewhere, the idea that to be 'justified' or 'reckoned righteous' is actually to be changed, not merely deemed to be changed, moved to the category of those to be saved. He speaks of this as a process, for example, 'we are being changed into his likeness; [2 Cor 3:18] and 'our inner nature is being renewed every day' [2 Cor 4:16]. This process involves suffering to be like Christ and being 'united with [Christ] in a death like his' [Romans 6:5]. He also speaks of 'belonging to Christ' [Romans 7:4] and the mutual indwelling of Christ and believers [Romans 8:1; 8:10]. Correct behaviour follows. Actions are the fruit of such roots.

Tuesday, 9th June 2020

Lesser Festival: Columba, Abbot of Iona and missionary, dec'd 597.

Commemoration: Ephrem of Syria, C4th theologian, teacher, and writer of hymns, active in what is now Turkish Kurdistan.

Before saying something in a few, necessarily superficial, words about the readings from Job and Paul's letter to the Romans, I should repeat my encouragement to have a look at one or more of the widely available commentaries on both books. These are deep, contested waters and benefit is to be gained from informed analysis.

Old Testament lesson: Job 8

Bildad the Shuhite starts his discourse by criticising Job's complaint. He then reasserts the orthodox cause-and-effect view of human flourishing: that wellbeing and suffering are to be experienced in direct proportion to the extent of someone's orientation towards God; by his complaint, Job has given priority to his personal experience over the lessons to be drawn from history. Using striking images, Bildad says that forgetting God is to remove the source of growth – as reeds cannot grow without water and marshland; in their hope to thrive, the godless depend on nothing more substantial than a spider's web.

New Testament lesson: Romans 4:13-25

Paul develops his theme that God's promises to Abraham may be inherited by the operation of faith and grace, which opens the way for participation by Gentiles, who are not subject to the law. Abraham, by his faith, set an example to be followed - faith in which he persisted, despite his age and Sarah's barrenness. As God gave life, by the birth of Isaac, so he raised Jesus from the dead. Deploying the additional reference to the 4th Servant Song of Isaiah [Isaiah 52:13-53:12], Paul draws an analogy between Abraham's faith and belief in Jesus – in both, he says, righteousness has and will be reckoned by God.

Monday, 8th June 2020

Lesser festival for Thomas Ken, Bishop of Bath and Wells, Hymn Writer, dec'd: 1711.

He was one of the non-juring bishops – he refused to take the Oath of Loyalty to William of Orange, after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, because he felt bound by his oath to James II.

Old Testament lesson: Job Ch.7

Job spells out why he is disinclined to follow Eliphaz's advice to be patient and have hope in the face of his undeserved suffering. The poetry is compelling and rich with imagery. To give an example, Job refers to the sea and the dragon – symbols of cosmic chaos, implying that God is treating him as a similarly hostile power. Job also parodies, in verses 17-21, Psalm 8, which is a hymn of praise to the creator God.

New Testament lesson: Romans 4:1-12

This is a key passage in which Paul sets out his reasoning as to why Gentiles may inherit the promises made by God to Abraham, without complying with the 'works' of the law (especially circumcision). Put shortly, his argument is that, as a gift, God reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness before he was circumcised, and therefore before any performance by him of works. Some may find this inspired and persuasive, others may think it casuist and rather reliant on selective quotation (for example, Paul does not refer to Genesis 17:14). Perhaps, the important point is that Paul grounds his argument in Hebrew scripture itself, acknowledging its continuing authority, to meet the objections to Gentile participation which were also Hebrew Bible-based.

Friday, 5th June

Lesser Festival for Boniface, also called Wynfrith, of Crediton, Bishop and Apostle of Germania, martyred in Frisia in 754

Old Testament lesson: Job Ch.5

The response of Eliphaz to Job's anguish at his undeserved suffering continues along the conventional lines of reward and punishment. He urges Job not to despise divine discipline. When he says that lack of wisdom can result in the destruction of children and crops, he is being especially insensitive as such disasters have just befallen Job. He is right, however, to predict that – in the end – Job will live to a ripe old age.

New Testament lesson: Romans 3:1-20

Citing the authority of Hebrew scripture, Paul has been arguing that outward observance does not relieve Jews from accountability to God for what is in their hearts. But he has extended that idea to say that, by the same token, what is in the heart can enable a Gentile to participate in the promises made by God to Abraham and, therefore, the divine plan for the cosmos. In today's reading, Paul deals with the obvious question which arises, does the Jew have any advantage? Paul says the answer is 'yes', primarily because Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. But he immediately undermines what he just said by extending his argument to include Gentiles, saying that everyone is equally under the power of sin and subject to the same judgement. Again, he cites as authority texts from what we call the Old Testament, in particular psalms, but also Proverbs and Isaiah [see: Psalm 14:1-2; 53:1-2; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Proverbs 1:16; Isaiah 59:7-8; Psalm 36:1; 143:2]. If Paul's central point has to do with the participation of Gentiles in God's promises to Israel, it is not surprising that, as a good Jew, he relies on Hebrew scripture to make it.

Thursday, 4th June

Commemoration: Petroc, C6th Abbot of Padstow.

Job has posed his anguished question about his undeserved suffering, 'why?'. In **Job Ch.4**, his friend, Eliphaz, makes his first ineffectual response, relying on traditional categories of explanation. Having expressed his understanding and concern, inviting Job to remember the advice that Job himself has given in the past. He then says, in summary, that human beings (and even angels) are inherently culpable and, as wickedness is to be punished, divine punishment is to be expected. This has been imparted to Eliphaz in a dreamlike theophany, a manifestation of God.

Romans 2:17-29 continues Paul's diatribe, specifically identifying his imaginary protagonist as a Jew. Paul understood himself to be the Apostle to the Gentiles in the Messianic era, which had already begun, in fulfilment of God's plan (repeatedly described in Hebrew scripture) to restore Israel, after which the Gentiles would come in and become members of the people of God. His argument was that Gentiles could, by faith and grace, participate in the promises made by God to Abraham, and be judged equally with Jews at the end time. In this reading, Paul says that, just as Gentiles could participate in this way without being circumcised, Jews could lose their special status if their outward appearance was inconsistent with what was in their hearts. In this, he acknowledged and asserted the authority of what we call the Old Testament (see, for example: Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:26; Ezekiel 44:9).

Wednesday, 3rd June

Commemoration of the Martyrs of Uganda, 45 Anglicans and Roman Catholics, executed in a late C19th persecution and Archbishop Luwum, who was murdered by order of Idi Amin in 1977.

Old Testament lesson: Job 3:1-10; 20-26

Job opens the debate about his undeserved suffering by cursing his own birth, relating his lament to the whole of creation – asking that the very day on which he was born itself perish and that the God-created favourable conditions for existence be reversed. Where the Genesis account of creation involved the imposition of order on chaotic waters, Job asks that skilled, professional diviners summon up Leviathan, the sea monster which represents cosmic chaos. He deploys a number of grotesque images: dark stars; his mother being perpetually pregnant; light mockingly provided to the blind and life to those who long for death. And he asks: why?

New Testament lesson: Romans 2:1-16

Paul engages in the rhetorical technique of diatribe – a form of argument which involves debate with an imaginary opponent. But who is the opponent? All judgemental hypocrites; or, law-breaking Jews? And what of the repeated assertion in this passage that God will judge people according to their actions? This would seem to be in flat contradiction of what he repeatedly says elsewhere, and which seems to be at the heart of his belief about salvation, that helpless humankind can be saved only by faith and the operation of grace. There are many excellent commentaries and online resources which might be of interest. One possible approach (though I make no special claim for it) is that Paul was simply inconsistent, perhaps a little carried away by his own rhetoric, in his anxiety to persuade others that Gentiles need not adopt all the obligations of Torah, the Hebrew law (especially circumcision), in order to inherit, and participate in, the promises made by God to Abraham, and to stand confidently before God's judgement on the last day. By this, Paul may have sacrificed consistency in order to make his point that 'God shows no partiality'.

Tuesday 2nd June

Old Testament lesson: Job 2

Job's family and all his possessions have been destroyed or stolen. Job's reaction has not been to criticise the Lord, but to worship Him. At another gathering of the 'heavenly beings' (an interestingly polytheistic throwback), Satan incites the Lord to intensify the test of Job, to permit the infliction of physical suffering, though Job's life must not be taken – that would defeat the object of the unfolding drama. Infected with loathsome sores, Job scrapes himself to relieve itching or, perhaps, in self-mortification. To his wife's intervention, he says that if the good is to be received from God, so must the bad. With the pastoral arrival of Job's three friends, the form changes from prose to poetry.

New Testament lesson: Romans 1:18-32

In this passage, Paul reviews the state of humankind, which, he says, has no excuse for its wicked behaviour because the nature of God has been revealed for all to see through God's relationship with His creation. None can plead ignorance. Jews, in particular, have the experience of deliverance from Egyptian and Babylonian bondage and the laws given to Moses, interpreted by the prophets. And yet, idolatry, sexual licence, and other listed transgressions are rife. When Paul becomes specific in relation to behaviour which he condemns, questions of discernment arise. Are all these prohibitions true, for all time and in all circumstances, irrespective of changes in social conditions and new ways of understanding human flourishing and a right relationship with God? Changes can be seen in the Bible itself (for example, by the time of Jesus, polygamy - practised by David and Solomon - seems to have died out). And few today would, however irritated by their offspring, think that they actually deserve, as Paul says, to die because of their rebelliousness (he may have had Deuteronomy 21:18-21 in mind). Secular authority, sexual ethics, and the status of women have been especially controversial topics.

Monday 1st June

The Lectionary, which sets the readings, has presented us with a formidable challenge: lessons on the same day from two of the most difficult books in the whole of scripture, Job and Paul's letter to the Romans.

The book of Job seems to be a reworked version of an ancient folk tale. It unflinchingly confronts the most extreme crisis of a faithful life lived in the face of catastrophe. Why me? Why, when I am innocent? Job is far from patient – his complaints will be long and loud. Three of his friends represent traditional categories of explanation – in particular, that suffering is related to wrong-doing. But they are irrelevant and unhelpful. Faith is not a matter of hope of reward or fear of punishment. As the Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote, *'Nothing, no human work, however valuable, merits grace, for if it did, grace would cease to be grace. This is the heart of the message of the book of Job.'* Today's long reading sets the scene.

I approach Paul's letter to the Romans with some trepidation. The theologian and retired bishop, Tom Wright, has written a book about Paul which is 1,700 pages long. The letters attributed to Paul are minefields of controversy, not least about whether he wrote some of them. However, these are foundational documents and we need to do something more than simply read or listen to them and ask ourselves how we feel about them. The letters are not the systematic theology of a new religion called 'Christianity'. They are 'occasional' in that they were written to address the specific circumstances of the communities to which they were addressed, in the context of general controversy, in particular whether, in order to be part of the Jesus-movement, Gentiles were bound by Torah, the Hebrew law, and in particular whether they must be circumcised. Paul relies on Hebrew scripture itself to argue not.

If (as some believe) Romans is chronologically the last of Paul's letters, he would not have known that. He was going to Jerusalem carrying money which he had collected from churches he had founded in Greece and Asia Minor, intending to go to Rome (where he had not been before) on his way to continue his mission in Spain. Today's reading begins this 7,000 word letter by establishing his own authority and asserting his core universalist belief.

This is a fathomless subject; there are many excellent commentaries and online resources you might like to explore.

Friday 29th May

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 33:1-5; 8-11; 26-29

Ch.33 of Deuteronomy consists of Moses' blessing of Israel. It is in the form of a father's blessing of his children when he is close to death. There are literary models for this elsewhere in the Old Testament concerning, for example, Isaac [Genesis 27:27-29], Jacob [Genesis 27:27-29; 49:1-28], and David [1 King's 2:1-4]. As with Moses' valedictory song, it seems to be a late insertion into an older text. It addresses each of the 12 tribes of Israel in turn as if it were an individual son. You may like to look at it for yourselves, it is a cracking read, but to keep it to a manageable length, I will refer, specifically, only to the tribe of Levi. This is because one of the dominant themes of Deuteronomy is that the Levites are to be responsible for continuing the Torah work of Moses, when Moses is no longer there to mediate with God and instruct the people, establishing dynamic, Levitical interpretative practices to develop the law to meet changed circumstances. Christians might draw some analogy between this and the work of the Holy Spirit through the church after Jesus' earthly mission.

New Testament lesson: 1 John 4:7-21

Today's reading develops the theme of love. The expression 'God is love', is not a definition of God, but a description of the lived experience of God. The words 'the love of God' could mean either our love for God or God's love for us. The author's point is the priority of the latter: that our love for each other is patterned on God's love for us, and is conclusive evidence that God lives in us. Love is not something to be induced by fear of punishment or hope of reward, it is to do with relationship. Fear of punishment comes from not loving enough. In all things, love comes first.

Thursday, 28th May 2020

The church commemorates: Lanfranc, who died on this day in 1089, lawyer, Benedictine monk, Archbishop of Canterbury and political fixer in the time of William the 1st and 2nd.

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 32:15-20; 23-24; 28-30; 36; 39; 43-47

Moses' valedictory speech to Israel (a combination of prophetic law suit and wisdom poetry) is immensely long. Private reading of it, in its entirety, is recommended! This is a selection of verses, representing its elements: indictment and evidence against Israel [vv.15-18]; conviction and sentence [vv.19-24]; assurance, confidence, and hope - notwithstanding [vv.28-30, 36, 39]; and praise of God [v.43]. After the song, Moses commands Israel to instruct its children in observance of the law, in order to prosper. This chimes with the scholarly view that this song was added to Deuteronomy after the Babylonian exile. By this, it both explained the disaster of the exile, in that Israel had brought it on itself by its disobedience, and warned about future conduct. Therefore, this ancient writing looked back to a future which had already happened, in order to address present and anticipated circumstances.

New Testament lesson: 1 John 4:1-6

This short passage has been seen as the key to this letter. Members of the community have left, as the result of a theological disagreement (the nature of which is unclear but it seems to have had to do with the significance of Jesus). The secessionists have had some missionary success, threatening the confidence of the community. The author is concerned to assure members of the community that they are 'from God' and, as result, have correctly discerned the truth and have, therefore, already defeated the secessionists. There is no middle way in this relentlessly dualistic text. Those who are not 'from God' are antichrist. People who listen to them demonstrate by doing so that they, too, are not 'from God'.

Wednesday 27th May

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 31:30-32:14

This is the start of Moses' valedictory song which, with the law, is to be deployed to condemn Israel for its betrayal. It is thought to be an insertion into Deuteronomy as late as the 2nd Temple Period, therefore after the Babylonian exile. It can be seen as an extended prophetic lawsuit, today's reading being an introduction, accusation, and recital of God's loving actions. In due course [v.39], the song will assert an emphatic monotheism. But notice that this opening draws on polytheistic mythology – the Lord God of Israel being depicted as pre-eminent among numerous competing gods.

New Testament lesson: 1 John 3:11-22

This reading develops the theme of love, having said that those born of God can be identified by their love of others. The story of Cain and Abel is used to illustrate the point. The message is strongly ethical and practical, concerned with meeting the needs of others in the community. The writer says that this love, in obedience to God, will enable the believer to stand in confidence before God but will earn the hatred of the world. Here, the author seems to be explaining and reinforcing the community's separation from outsiders and the need for internal cohesion. This illustrates why context can be so important. A wider Christian view, taking into account what we find elsewhere in the Bible, especially in the gospels, is that love and its practical expression should extend – difficult though it may be - even to enemies.

Tuesday, 26 May 2020

Lesser Festival for Augustine, first Archbishop of Canterbury in the C 7th (not to be confused with St. Augustine of Hippo)

In a demonstration of typically Anglican even-handedness, the Church also commemorates two C16th contemporaries, the reformer, John Calvin, and the founder of the Congregation of the Oratory in Rome, Philip Neri.

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 14-19; 22-29

Moses is close to death. Joshua is taking over political and military leadership but religious authority is to be found in the law which is left with the Levitical priests and elders. In today's reading, the Lord appears in a pillar of cloud (a theophany) and, anticipating Israel's disobedience after Moses' death, tells him to write down a valedictory song which, with the law, will be deployed in due course to condemn Israel for its betrayal.

New Testament lesson: 1 John 3:1-10

This passage is strikingly dualistic, using stark 'either-or' imagery to define the community of Jesus-followers. Themes which are usually associated with the end-time are deployed to encourage the community in their present situation of schism and the threat from false teachers. In other words, the author brings into the present the age in which the realm of God excludes everything that opposes it. By the Father's love, the members of the community are said to be children of God, who will be like Jesus when his nature is fully revealed. Those who are children of God and those who are not can be distinguished by their conduct and, in particular, whether they love their brothers and sisters.

Monday, 25th May 2020

Lesser Festival - The Venerable Bede, the Jarrow monk and historian [672/3-735]

Commemorating: Aldhelm, C8th Bishop of Sherborne

By way of introduction to both of today's readings, you may wish to look back at the notes for last Friday.

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 31:1-13

Deuteronomy is nearing its conclusion, and with it the end of the five books (the Pentateuch) of the law (Torah). Moses announces his own death. He has been a political and religious leader. He hands over political and military leadership to Joshua, but religious authority is now to be found in the law, which Moses has expounded at great length and given to the Levitical priests – to be taught to the whole people at regular liturgical assemblies.

New Testament lesson: 1 John 2:18-29

What are known as the 3 letters of John take up about 5 pages of a standard Bible. Whole books have been written about those 5 pages. But we should not be deterred by their difficulty. It may help to think of 1 John as assurance from someone in authority to a community of Jesus-followers, that they should have confidence in the truth which has already been revealed to them and the resulting joy they have already shared. Today's reading refers to schism (some of the community have left) and the imminent arrival of false alternatives to Christ. The former, by their actions, have showed that they never truly belonged. The latter intend to deceive. If the truth heard by the members of the community abides in them, they will abide in the Father and the Son and have eternal life; which does not mean life going on for ever in the future – it folds the past and future into the ever present.

Friday 22nd May

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 29:2-15

The history of the composition of the book of Deuteronomy, in the form in which we have it, involves centuries of writing and rewriting, drawing on older materials and oral tradition, and being constantly edited adapted to meet changed circumstances. Though it is set at the time when the children of Israel are about to enter the promised land (changing from an itinerant society to one which is settled and agrarian), it accommodates not just liberation from Egyptian bondage, but also later civil war, seduction by the cultic practices of Canaan, and the Babylonian exile. Indeed, the last verse of today's reading may refer to the Jewish diaspora in the Persian empire of the 6th to the 4th centuries BC. This may help us to set it in context. Moses reminds the people of all that God has done for them and the promises made to their ancestors. The setting is striking: an assembly of every tribe and every type of person in order to renew commitment to the covenant. This seems to be a liturgical scene. A little later [Deuteronomy 31:10-13] Moses will command that this be done every 7 years, during the festival of booths. The practice of Torah is not, therefore, only a matter of following laws set out in scrolls, but regular public assemblies in which a discrete, self-aware community declares its commitment to God and is reconstituted as God's people, dedicated to fulfilling his purposes.

New Testament lesson: 1 John 1:1-2:6

The question of the authorship of this letter or homily is an open one, though it seems to originate in the same community or school as the Fourth Gospel and was prompted by disputes about the correct beliefs to be held about Jesus and the fear of false teachers. The text really needs to be read repeatedly and slowly, as it is exceptionally dense and lacks a clear structure. This opening passage bears some similarities to the prologue of the gospel but is more concerned with the shared experience of believers and the resulting sense of communion, with the concomitant need to acknowledge and be cleansed from sin (which is how those who believe may be identified).

Thursday 21st May 2020 **Ascension Day**

The ascension can cause questions in the minds of those concerned with the historicity of Biblical accounts. In Luke's gospel, it occurs on the same day as the discovery of the empty tomb and the supper at Emmaus, and is described in one short sentence [Luke 24:51]. In the

Acts of the Apostles, the same author writes that it occurred 40 days later and describes it in some detail, with the apocalyptic scenery of clouds and the accompaniment of angelic interpreters [Acts 1:6-11]. The story appears in no other gospel, except in an alternative ending to Mark which was probably added in the C2nd [Mark 16:19].

However, this is not to discount it, as important theological points are made, principally concerned with the incarnation, which stand against the idea of disembodied souls floating up to heaven.

The humanity of Jesus is taken into the transcendent reality of God. His body is not just a temporary vehicle but a divine action with eternal consequences. The ascension is a sign of the redemption of humanity, redemption of the world, not an escape from it. Paradoxically, it has the appearance of finality while pointing to the open future of inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

Today's readings resonate with associated ideas. The Old Testament story of Elijah's bodily ascension, **2 Kings 2.1a; 7b-15**, includes the request by his successor, Elisha, to inherit his spirit, which he does in the physical form of Elijah's mantle, which he immediately deploys to repeat the miracles of Moses and Elijah in the parting of water [Exodus 14:21; 2 Kings 2:8]. The passage from **Revelation 5:1-5; 11-14** is part of the vision of God enthroned with the ascended Christ, as the bodily sacrificed, now glorified Lamb. A scroll, which sets out the divine plan of judgement and salvation, is sealed and, therefore, both unalterable and unknown. However, the Lamb is worthy to break the seals, thereby unfurling God's redemptive purposes; the creator renewing creation.

Wednesday 20th May Rogation

Old Testament lesson: 2 Samuel 23.1-5

The book of Judges (which comes just before Samuel) describes Israel's descent into corruption (political, religious, and moral) after the reign of Joshua. Samuel is called by God to sort out the mess caused by the house of Eli. Samuel is a 'judge'. As well as determining disputes, he is a religious, secular, and military leader. The people demand a king (so as to be like the surrounding nations). God reluctantly agrees. Samuel anoints Saul, who turns out to be bad king. Wounded and defeated in battle at Mount Gilboa, Saul falls upon his sword. David succeeds him and enjoys mixed fortunes. Today's reading is a song called *The Last Words of David* (i.e. the last poem composed by David). It is an oracle rather than a blessing and concentrates on the covenant between the Lord and the house of David, promising order, security, and prosperity. A royal sun metaphor (common in the Ancient Near East, especially Egypt) is used to convey the idea of the king a perpetual source of growth.

New Testament lesson: Colossians 2:20-3:4

There has been lively academic debate as to whether this letter was written by Paul or one of his disciples. Whichever is correct, if it was not written by Paul himself, it was written by someone who was very close to his theological thinking and, in that sense, it can be treated as authentic. The consequences of rising with Christ are explored. "Dying" here means the old self dying "*with Christ*" and, being "*raised with Christ*", living a new life freed from day-to-day "*regulations*" (for example, dietary rules) which give only the appearance, not the reality, of spiritual strength. Rising "*with Christ*" involves complete reorientation, away from the values of the world, anticipating the revelation of the deepest reality, at the end of time, when Christ will return in glory.

Tuesday 19th May 2020 Rogation

The Lesser Festival of St. Dunstan, C10th Archbishop of Canterbury and statesman who revived monastic life at Glastonbury

Today's readings approach the question of reward and punishment very differently.

The reading from **Deuteronomy 28:1-14** is the first part of a section dealing the consequences of obedience and disobedience to the Lord's commands. Today, the blessings following obedience are spelled out; later verses recite, at rather greater length, the curses resulting from disobedience (these are modelled on an Ancient Near East treaty). Every type of benefit is promised: military victory, the indebtedness of other nations, abundant harvests, prosperity, and a thriving population.

1 Peter 4:12-19 stands against this idea of earthly reward or punishment; that suffering in this life is the price exacted by God for disobedience to His commands. The letter is addressed to people who are suffering because of their faith, not their disobedience. Remembering that Christ himself suffered, the hope held out is that present suffering is a sign of vindication in the imminently expected judgement at the end of time. Notice the very early use of the expression 'Christian'.

Monday 18th May 2020

Rogation – from the Latin 'rogare', 'to ask', a time of fasting and prayer to ward off calamity, in preparation for Ascension Day. Traditionally, it also has involved blessing planted fields and 'beating the bounds'.

In Matthew's gospel [22:34-40], when Jesus was asked by a Pharisee lawyer to identify the greatest commandment, he replied by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, that it is to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind. Then, quoting Leviticus 19:18, he said that a 2nd commandment was like it: loving one's neighbour as oneself. Therefore, the duty to behave ethically flows from a right relationship with God. This idea is to be found in both of today's lessons.

In **Deuteronomy 26:12-15; 18-19**, Moses is passing on the Lord's commands about correct liturgical practices, which are combined with ethical instructions for the relief of poverty and hardship. These commands flow from the covenant relationship between God and the children of Israel, obedience to them is Israel's side of the agreement. God's part is to treasure the people and, emphasising His universal sovereignty, set them above all nations.

The author of **1 Peter 4:1-11**, writing to encourage beleaguered followers of Jesus, emphasises that they are right to withdraw from the practices of their neighbours and urges them to support each other in love. This imperative, concerned with their relationship with each other, flows from their relationship with God, who provides them with the strength to do right, to God's glory. Notice the urgency of the appeal – the early Jesus-movement believed that the risen Christ would return in judgement at any moment.

Friday 15th May 2020 – Easter Season

After an excursion prompted by St Matthias' Day, the Lectionary takes us back to Deuteronomy and 1 Peter. As last Friday, these are the lessons set for tomorrow.

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 24:5-22

The commandments in Deuteronomy concern what might be called vertical and horizontal relationships: 'vertical', between the Lord and the children of Israel; 'horizontal', within the human community, dependant on the vertical, demanding conformity with the Lord's commands to promote communal cohesion and human flourishing. Today's reading concerns the second category. The rules are practical, easy to understand, and remarkable considering

that they are intended to regulate a people of the early Bronze Age. They promote an ethos of generosity, justice, freedom from oppression, and provision for the vulnerable.

New Testament lesson: 1 Peter 3:13-22

Pursuing the theme of encouragement to hard-pressed Christians, today's reading urges that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong – the pattern being the sufferings of Christ. The Flood, which swept away sinful humanity, is said to prefigure baptism. However, it is not the cleansing effect of water which counts, baptism derives its efficacy from the resurrection and resulting victory of Christ over the spiritual powers which underpin opposition to the Jesus-movement.

Thursday 14th May 2020

The Feast of St. Matthias, chosen by the apostles to replace Judas Iscariot [Acts 1:21-26].

Old Testament lesson: 1 Samuel 16:1-13a

This is the story in which the prophet and judge, Samuel, anoints David. Israel's experiment with monarchy (which Samuel had initially refused to institute) has not been a success. Saul, chosen by God and anointed by Samuel, has undermined Samuel's religious leadership [13:8-14] and disobeyed the Lord's clear command utterly to destroy the Amalekites, their king, Agag, and their livestock; as a result, God has rejected Saul's kingship [15:1-32]. In today's reading, Samuel is sent by the Lord to find another king from among the sons of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, who was the grandson of Boaz and Ruth. The Lord tells Samuel to lie about the purpose of his visit, in order to avoid Saul's reprisal. Samuel is only the instrument of the Lord's choice, which is based on David's true nature ('the Lord looks on the heart' [v.7]); the point being made is that of the Lord's inscrutable, majestic purpose for Israel, which is beyond even Samuel's discernment. David is anointed, the Lord's spirit comes mightily upon him and departs from Saul. However, Saul is still king and this coup will lead to bloody civil war.

New Testament lesson: Matthew 7:15-27

This is the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus gives warnings which balance the blessings with which the sermon begins. False prophets, exemplifying the difference between appearance and reality, will be known by their fruit. The gravity of the choice before humankind is spelled out. The apparent security of a house built on sand will not survive the storm of judgement at the end of time. Salvation depends on hearing and acting upon Jesus' words, the foundational rock of faith.

Wednesday 13th May 2020

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 18:9-22

Moses instructs the people not to engage in multiple forms of superstition (including divination and necromancy), there being only one exclusive form of mediated communication with God – a succession of God-ordained, independent prophets, of which Moses is the paradigm. As with the kings of the reading yesterday, the prophets must come from among the children of Israel. The reading ends with a warning against false prophets, who will be known to be false if they get things wrong. One may ask whether this is a satisfactory answer; discernment is a perennial problem for any believer and, as Deuteronomy itself says in 13:2, even false prophets may sometimes get lucky.

New Testament lesson: 1 Peter 2:1-10

In the sequence of imperatives, the author turns to the necessity of growth after rebirth and the longing for spiritual nourishment to bring that growth about. This passage stands against the individualistic idea that faith has to do with answering the question, 'Will I go to heaven when I die?' The images deployed are communal, rather than individual, drawing on Hebrew

scripture [Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 8:14-015; Hosea 2:23; Exodus 19:6], emphasising that God's people, inheritors of the promises made to Abraham, are those – gentiles and well as Jews - with faith in Jesus Christ. The metaphor for communal unity is that of a building (as it were, in place of the Jerusalem temple), built with the living stones of believers, with Christ (the stone rejected by the Jewish establishment and many Jews) as the cornerstone.

Tuesday 12th of May

The Church commemorates Gregory Dix, Anglican Benedictine monk and liturgical scholar, who died in 1952.

The abolition of the multiplicity of local sanctuaries, made it necessary to institute legal reforms, giving authority to the priests and judges at the central sanctuary (in reality, in Jerusalem). Today's reading, **Deuteronomy 17:8-10, 14-20**, turns to the question of non-priestly leadership. The requirements are, for their antiquity, strikingly enlightened. The people may have a king, but quite unlike the kings of the surrounding nations, any kings of Israel must not use their office to enrich themselves and, rather than promulgating laws by decree, they must be subject to the law, as interpreted by the Levitical priests.

After yesterday's preface to the letter, today's reading, **1 Peter 1:13-25**, consists of a series of imperatives for Christian life. The emphasis is on a disciplined holiness, arising from being made new or rebirth. 'Holiness', in this context, is a rich idea, which is quite hard to define. It has to do with being, in faith and hope, conformed to the will of God, orientated towards the transcendent or the numinous - the dimension beyond time and space on which creation depends; being set apart from false material values, while still being engaged with the world of time and space. The writer plainly believes that the end of time is imminent.

Monday 11th May 2020

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 16:1-3; 8-10; 13-14; 16-20

Moses prescribes the calendar for festivals to be celebrated at the Jerusalem Temple (replacing those at multiple local sanctuaries). There are three: Passover/unleavened bread (remembering the Exodus); the weeks (celebrating the grain harvest); and booths (following the grape harvest). The number 7 recurs (days/weeks), as we saw last week with fallow and debt remission, drawing on the 7-day creation story and the institution of the sabbath. As so often, there is the dual, interconnected concern with (1) the relations between the people and God and (2) relationships amongst the people themselves. Cultic ritual is not only for the worship of God, it is bound up with rejoicing by the whole community (sons, daughters, male and female slaves, Levites, strangers, orphans, widows [v.14]) and generosity [v.17]. The reading concludes with instruction about the administration of impartial justice, with the necessary implication that this does not stand alone but is intimately connected with, and dependent on, the worship of God.

New Testament lesson: 1 Peter 1:1-12

There is broad scholarly agreement that this letter was written in the latter part of the C1st, after Peter's death, and is not by him. Its authority derives from its inclusion in the canon of scripture and centuries of reflection and application. It is an exhortation to hard-pressed Christians to stand firm ('exiles' [v.1] probably relates to social exile), recognising the preciousness of what they have already received and the assurance of vindication at the end of time (which is expected soon – reference to the 'delayed *parousia*', the frustration of the expectation of Christ's imminent return, is to come in 2 Peter 3:1-13). Salvation is seen both as relief from present hardship and from the fear of adverse judgement '*in the last time*' [v.5]. Christ's suffering and subsequent glory (as foretold by the prophets) stands as the example. Reference to the prophets illustrates the desire of the early Jesus movement to be seen as a

continuation of, not a break with, Israel's religious self-understanding – fulfilment, not contradiction.

Friday 8th of May – in Easter Season

A Lesser Festival for **Dame Julian of Norwich**, a mystic and anchoress who died in 1413. She survived serious illness, lived in a cell at St Julian's church in Norwich, and described a series of visions in her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*.

A prayer attributed to Dame Julian of Norwich

Lord, let not our souls be busy inns that have no room for thee or thine, but quiet homes of prayer and praise, where thou mayest find fit company. Where the needful cares of life are wisely ordered and put away, and wide, sweet spaces kept for thee; where holy thoughts pass up and down and fervent longings watch and wait thy coming. **Amen.**

And from her Revelations of Divine Love:

Wouldest thou wit thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Wit it well: Love was his meaning. Who shewed it thee? Love. What shewed He thee: Love. Wherefore shewed it He? For love. ... Thus was I learned that Love is our Lord's meaning.

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 15:1-8, 12-15

This passage from Deuteronomy is a prescription for communal solidarity and mutual support which, notwithstanding our abhorrence of slavery, is remarkable for the Bronze Age from which it came. It directs, every 7th year, the release of neighbours from debt and the grant of freedom to male and female Hebrew slaves. This chimes with leaving land fallow in every 7th year [Exodus 23:11] and with the sabbath commandment, which itself goes back to God's resting, in the first creation story [Genesis 2:1-3]. It resonates with the idea of regular cessation of activity, giving one's life back to God in gratitude. Debt remission broadens into a command to be generous to any member of the community in need [v.7]. As well as being granted their freedom, slaves must be provided for [vv.13-4], remembering God's faithfulness in securing Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage.

New Testament lesson: Ephesians 6:10-18, 23-4

St. Paul's understanding of sin in terms of enemy powers is reflected here (by a later admirer, if the preponderance of scholarly opinion is correct and St Paul was not the author). The cosmic battle against them is stirringly portrayed as warfare – an existential struggle, with the highest possible stakes: spiritual life or death. The metaphorical armour and weaponry is both defensive and offensive (drawing on Old Testament reference, some examples will be given): breastplate and helmet [Isaiah 59:17], shield [Psalm 18:2], and sword [Isaiah 49:2]. The shoes [Isaiah 52:7] imply the forward motion of active mission and the belt ensures freedom of movement (to fight and to travel). Mutual support is emphasised [v.18] and the passage ends with a prayer suffused with these elements: community, peace, love, faith, and grace.

Thursday 7th May – in Easter Season

Especially vividly, the Lectionary readings set for today demonstrate the importance of discernment in the face of the difficulties which can be caused by the literal reading of bits of the Bible. In **Deuteronomy 11:8-9, 22-28, 31-32**, the Lord defines the boundaries of the Promised Land, from which he will drive all its inhabitants (which is difficult enough for a Christian understanding of God). It includes, in modern terms, the present states of Israel (including Sinai), Jordan, and Lebanon, about 2/3 of Syria and a good chunk of Iraq. Although almost no one takes the full extent of this seriously now, even in an attenuated form, it has been a complication in the tangled, violent history of that troubled part of the world. I have explored this problem in earlier notes, which can still be seen.

The passage in **Ephesians 5:15-33** explicitly instructs the subordination of wives to their husbands. Some Christians still take this literally, to be obeyed as the unquestionable word of God. Others will say that, in the context of the time of writing, it is understandable that the writer of the epistle accepted, as a premise, the reality of the family structure of those days, but gave it a distinctly Christian dimension by insisting that husbands must love, nourish and tenderly care for their wives - as Christ does for his Church. They might add that we need not accept the premise as it seems to be contradicted by principles of interpretation which are to be found elsewhere in the Bible, including in the writings of St Paul.

In relation to the Old Testament, by the time the gospels had been written and disseminated, the very many laws to do with the Temple (its design, its administration, its priesthood, and the intricate detail of cultic ritual observance) could not be obeyed. They were completely redundant. The Temple and all the paraphernalia of its cult had been utterly destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. St. Paul, writing before the destruction of the Temple, set out the overarching principle by which all laws should be interpreted: *'For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."*' [Galatians 5:14]; and he emphasised the priority of the spirit over the letter: *'[God] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.'* [2 Corinthians 3:6].

Followers of Jesus were not freed from a literal reading of the Torah, only for it to be replaced by another set of rules. The Rev'd Professor Keith Ward put it well: *'[Christian life] is a life that is to be formed on the pattern of Christ, by the inner working of the Spirit. That pattern is clear, but it is a pattern of attitudes and dispositions, not of rules and prescriptions.'*

Wednesday 6th May – in Easter Season

Both of today's readings concern the duty to strive to imitate God – a duty imposed by the covenant relationship with God resulting from ethnicity (in Deuteronomy) or conversion (in Ephesians). This has to do with conduct: interpersonal relations, legal and social justice, commitment to human flourishing, and care for creation. If each reading has limitations, which are to be expected in the context of its composition, that should not detract from its core message.

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-22

This reading emphasises the importance of listening to God and the practice of legal and social justice in imitation of him, deriving from the covenant relationship between God and Israel. This involves acknowledging that the deepest reality lies beyond the self and that how humankind behaves (interpersonally and in the ordering of society) should strive to conform to that reality. The word 'strangers', means resident aliens – disadvantaged because they could not hold property in land nor belong to a property owner's household. However, it should be noted that this passage immediately precedes commandments concerned with violent ethnic cleansing and detailed prescriptions for exclusive, centralised, cultic ritual.

New Testament lesson: Ephesians 5:1-14

This reading opens with the exhortation to *'be imitators of God'*, deriving from an analogous father/child relationship - the 'inheritance', to which v.5 refers, deriving from belief not genetic transmission - and Christ's sacrifice [v.2] standing in the place of the sacrifices of cultic ritual. There is particular concern with sexual wrongdoing and its trivialisation by silly, casual gossip. Some contemporary readers may think of 'the wrath of God' less in terms of active punishment than the self-inflicted pain of alienation from the source of love.

Tuesday 5th May 2020 – in Easter Season

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 9:23-10:5

New Testament lesson: Ephesians 22-32

It is often, rightly, said that the Bible is not a book but a library. For Christians, the form (the ‘canon’) in which we have it today had emerged by the end of the C4th AD – though there is still controversy; there has been disagreement about which books should be included between the denominations: the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and other churches. Today’s readings illustrate that in the many centuries over which the Bible’s many books were written and edited, there were radical developments in the understanding of God. In other words, within the Bible itself, we find immense changes of perception. It would be very odd indeed, if humankind’s response to and understanding of God since the C4th had been unchanging and entirely uniform. It always has been dynamic and developing.

In Deuteronomy, God is patiently faithful to his chosen but disobedient people, but is also wrathful and destructive, urging the violent occupation of other people’s land, ethnic cleansing, and utter destruction. He writes laws on tablets of stone and dictates to Moses hundreds of others, many to do with cultic ritual – emphasising the terrible consequences of disobedience. A very different depiction is found in ‘the prophets’. For example, Amos [5:21-24] deplores mechanistic cultic ritual and extols social justice. Instead of laws of the covenant being written on tablets of stone to be obeyed by the people, they are written in the heart of each member of the community; Jeremiah [31:33] writes, *‘But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’* Ezekiel [36:26] takes it still further, *‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.’* The progression is such that by the time of today’s epistle, the community is not defined by ethnicity but by putting away *‘your former way of life’* [4:22], accepting the *‘truth [that] is in Jesus’* [4:22], living by clothing a new self *‘created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness’* [4:24], in a community of love and mutual forgiveness [4:32].

Monday 4th of May – in Easter Season

A Lesser Festival: The English saints and martyrs of the Reformation.

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 9:6-21

Today’s reading continues the not entirely straightforward story in Deuteronomy of God’s faithfulness to Israel, at the same time as bloody conquest and ethnic cleansing. There are notes about this problem accompanying earlier videos, which are drawn together in one document, linked from the Glaphorn Church website homepage. In this passage, Moses recalls discovery of the worship of the golden calf and smashing the stone tablets on which the 10 commandments were written (a legal procedure acknowledging the breaking of a treaty). He then successfully intercedes with God on Israel’s behalf and saves them from destruction.

New Testament lesson: Ephesians 4:1-16

This is an eloquent plea to live in unity and love, of which Christ is the pattern, while each person steadfastly uses his or her particular gifts to build up the body of Christ.

Friday 1st May 2020

A double saints' day: St Philip (who features in the New Testament lesson) and St James (who, with Peter and John, was with Jesus at the raising of the daughter of Jairus, the transfiguration and in the garden of Gethsemane).

Old Testament lesson: Job 23:1-12

The 'wisdom' book of Job unflinchingly confronts the implacable reality and inevitability of human suffering and provides no easy answer. Walter Brueggemann (one of the most distinguished of contemporary Christian Old Testament scholars) writes that it *'lives – rhetorically and theologically – at the edge of the Old Testament ... challenges the basic premises of Israel's faith, and refuses any easy resolution of the most difficult theological questions that appear on [its] horizon'* and is *'an artistic extremity that is peculiarly matched to the most extreme crises of life lived in faith.'*

Job is not 'patient' but vehemently disputes with his companions (who stand for settled, traditional faith) and God. A blameless man of faith, he suffers terribly - why?

The idea of the relationship with God being a matter of fear of punishment or hope of reward is confronted and dismissed. In today's reading, Job makes the category error of thinking that God's justice is like that of legal proceedings, in which earthly ideas of fairness, guilt and innocence apply. Job finds that searching for God to be that kind of judge is futile. Raw life cannot be reduced to explanation. God stands outside a consequential system of reward and punishment. Were that not so, as liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez says, grace would not be grace.

New Testament lesson: John 1:43-51

John is describing gathering the first disciples. Jesus' priority in relation to John the Baptist is emphasised. In Galilee, Jesus finds Philip (who comes from the same town as Andrew, formerly a follower of the Baptist, and Peter, who have already joined him). Philip, identifying Jesus as foretold by the law and the prophets, tells Nathaniel to come and see ('finding' and 'seeing' are common Johannine themes). Philip's question about whether anything good can come out of Nazareth [v.46] is richly ironic (typical of John), given what has been revealed to the reader in the opening verses of the gospel. Nathaniel seems to be a representative or metaphorical figure, standing for those Jews who come to accept Jesus' relationship with the Father. Jesus has seen him under a fig tree (which may stand for Israel and/or rabbinic literature, being a place Jews studied the Torah/law). Nathaniel is depicted as exceeding Jacob (the deceiver, whose name was changed to Israel after he had wrestled with the angel/God). His calling Jesus the 'King of Israel' anticipates the double meaning of that expression in Jesus' trial before Pilate. Jesus says that angels will ascend and descend not, as in the story of Jacob's ladder (in Genesis 28:12), but on Jesus, as the link between the Father and humankind.

Thursday, 30th April 2020

Commemorating Pandita Mary Ramabai [1858-1922], Indian Christian convert, educator and social reformer

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 7:1-11

Moses relays to the children of Israel the Lord's ferocious command of the complete ritual destruction of the nations presently occupying the land they are about to conquer (the people and all their religious artefacts) and forbids any assimilation by intermarriage. Dire, immediate punishment of disobedience is threatened. This may result from editing after the Babylonian exile, during which the people had found themselves outside the promised land, in explanation of the disaster of the defeat of Jerusalem in 587 BC (punishment for

disobedience) and a then contemporary concern which necessitated a warning against assimilation. (See also the note for 21st April.)

New Testament lesson: Ephesians 2:11-22

Christ has broken the division between Jew and Gentile (represented by the mechanistic observance of *'commandments and ordinances'* [v.15] but not to create, as it were, a third entity, but to reveal that Israel's blessings and benefits are now universally available. The community of God is, therefore, a universally expanded continuation of the old. This is emphasised by the metaphor of the temple, *'with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone'* [vv.19-22]. This may recall, for example, Isaiah's image of the purified Jerusalem, drawing all nations to it (e.g. Isaiah 2:2-4) or Psalm 86:9.

Wednesday, 29th April 2020

A 'lesser festival': Catherine of Siena [1347-80] Dominican mystic

Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; 20-25

Moses begins to set out the Lord's commandments (hundreds of them), which must be kept by the children of Israel if they are to flourish in the Promised Land. They have already heard the 10 commandments for themselves. Moses begins with what appears to be the overarching principle: *'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might'* [v.5]. This was (more or less) quoted by Jesus when he was asked by a Pharisee lawyer which is the greatest commandment [Matthew 22:37]. Moses also demands that all the commandments be taught to succeeding generations. Obedience will be rewarded; disobedience punished. The 'New Atheists' (not really very 'new', mostly they have reheated some very old arguments) have a great deal of fun with the commands which seem to commend selling a daughter into slavery [Exodus 21:7] or stoning to death a rebellious son [Deuteronomy 21:18-21] but ignore the Bronze Age context and what is to be found, later, in the books of the prophets (for example, the social justice demands and critique of cultic ritual in Amos 5:21-24).

New Testament lesson: Ephesians 2:1-10

Analysis of this problematical passage is far beyond the scope of this short note. It is for teaching, and/or mature, private reflection with the help of scholarly commentary, and/or structured, informed discussion in a scripture study group. I will set out some questions which may be worth thinking about (these really are questions, not expressions of personal opinion).

The metaphor 'death' is used for the effect of sin, especially *'following the desires of the flesh'* – determined (*'we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else'* [v.3]) by the influence of hostile spiritual forces. But *'you'/'we'* have been saved by grace, through faith [v.8] – who is *'you'* and *'we'*? Throughout this passage (except for v.7), the author has used the past tense, describing salvation as already having occurred (therefore, irrespective of future conduct). On whom has God bestowed the gift and why? What is the relationship between grace and faith? Does one come before the other? Does the exercise of a person's 'will' play any part at all? Who is the *'everyone else'* [v.3] who has not been saved? Why have they not been saved? On what basis has God saved some and not others, if salvation *'is not your own doing; it is the gift from God – not the result of works'* [vv.8-9] (good works being the sign, not the cause of salvation [v.10])? Were the 'saved' predestined to be saved: *'we are what he has made us, created in Jesus Christ for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life'* [v.10]? Is this consistent with v.3? Is it a matter God's limitless sovereignty and inscrutable will, which it is not for us to question [Job 38:1-7]? Predestination (at its simplest, that each of us, from *'before the foundations of the world were laid'*, is predestined to be saved or damned) is a hugely difficult and complex subject. Predestination and election are to be found in the Church of England's Article of Religion XVII. In its strictest form, it is at odds with universalism (that everyone will, or at least may,

be saved) and Arminianism (by which salvation is not independent of the exercise of free will). By one understanding, it has led to antinomianism – the belief that the ‘elect’, predestined for salvation, can behave as badly as they like (something brilliantly portrayed in John Buchan’s historical novel *Witch Wood*).

Tuesday, 28 April 2020, Easter Season

Commemorate: Pierre Chanel, Missionary in the South Pacific, Martyr, 1841

The Lectionary, the set readings for each day, takes us through the early part of Deuteronomy and the Epistle to the Ephesians. I said something about each of these yesterday and the notes, by way of introduction, can still be read on the Glaphorn Church Facebook page and linked from the Glaphorn Church website homepage.

In short summary, the **Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 5:22-33** is a prelude to an immensely long recitation by Moses of the laws which will govern the lives of the children of Israel. There are hundreds of them, many to do with cultic ritual. The only laws which the people heard directly from God have been the 10 commandments. Otherwise, at their request, Moses mediates, passing on God’s commands. In this, we find a feature of religious life which through history has raised an interesting question: to what extent is the relationship between believers and God to be mediated by a priesthood presiding over religious institutions?

The people ask Moses to act as go-between, between them and God, because of their fear that the theophany from which God speaks, a great fire, would consume them (cloud and thick darkness is also mentioned [v.22]). In Exodus 33:20, God says to Moses, ‘*You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live*’; after which, Moses stands in a cleft of a rock, his eyes covered by God’s ‘hand’ [v.22], as the fullness of God’s glory, his very identity, passes by (though Moses is allowed to see his back [v.23]).

In the **New Testament lesson: Ephesians 1:15-23**, the author continues, in a richly metaphorical vein, with a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s wisdom and power, fulfilled in the continuing work and authority of the risen Christ, the head of his ‘body’, the universal church. Revealed wisdom (rather than factual knowledge) enlightens ‘the eyes of the heart’ [v.18], engendering the richness of salvation hope. The idea of the risen Christ being seated at God’s right hand [v.21] echoes Ps 110:1 ‘*The LORD says to my lord, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool”*’- evoking the idea of Jesus as the cosmic edition of a Davidic king. But these are just a few inadequate signposts. A good commentary is needed to begin to penetrate the complexity of this text. To illustrate this point, the Christian theologian J.D.G. Dunn has written of vv.22-3, ‘*Does it refer to Christ or to the church? Does it draw on ideas familiar from later Gnostic texts – Christ as a kind of cosmic being which comprises the totality of sentient reality? The answer is probably that the writer has been carried away by his language and imagery and is playing on the familiar Jewish thought of God or God’s spirit as filling the cosmos [Jeremiah 23:24; Wisdom 1:7; cf. Psalm 139:7]. Christ now embodies that fullness [cf. Colossians 1:19; 2:9]. And the church, his body, is (or should be!) the place where God’s presence in and purpose for creation comes to its clearest expression. Would that it were so!*’

27th April 2020

Commemoration of Christina Rossetti

The Old Testament: Deuteronomy 5:1-22

This the account in Deuteronomy of the ten commandments (there is, of course, a version which differs in Exodus 20:1-17). That these have appeared on huge boards on the walls of many churches may have given the impression that living a life of faith involves obeying a set of rules out of fear of punishment or hope of reward – a sense rather reinforced by the threat, in this reading [v.9], that dire punishment would be meted out not only to those who commit idolatry, but also to their blameless children, to the 4th generation (an injustice corrected in Ezekiel 18:20). It might have been simpler and better just to have Jesus’s reply, when asked which is the greatest commandment, ““You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

The Decalogue is fundamental to the covenant between YHWH and Israel and Israel as God’s revelation to humankind. The commandments are essentially to do with the relationship with God [1-3] and other people [5-10]. No.4, that relating to the Sabbath, is the only one to do with a religious custom, uniting social reality (the need for rest) with the cosmic (God rested after completing creation [Genesis 2:3]). These commands set the template for communal life after slavery in Egypt, a society practising God’s justice rather than subjected to the cruelty and injustice of Pharaoh’s brickyards [Exodus 5:1-21]. By this, liberation is not a one-off event, but a continual process. Built on the covenant relationship, and the importance of family, persons and property are protected (defending the weak from the strong).

The New Testament: Ephesians 1:1-14

Taking a lesson from one of the ‘Pauline’ letters, to be read during an act of worship, is usually hugely challenging. The theological meditations and exhortations attributed to St Paul are often exceedingly complex and arguably inconsistent. The practical pastoral advice, especially that relating to the role of women, can be hard to sustain out of the contexts to which it was directed. These ancient texts have been the subject of libraries of analysis. Today’s reading is the opening of what is known as St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. For all its merits, it must be acknowledged that the majority of scholarly opinion holds that this was not written by St Paul, was not originally addressed to the Ephesians, and may not even have been a letter. It seems to draw for its theology on the letter to the Colossians (on which, in relation to authorship, opinion is more evenly divided). However, whether St Paul personally wrote a particular letter is not determinative of authority, it would carry weight if, for example, the author was a close follower, writing to carry on his teaching in the form of a homily or sermon to be read in gatherings of early Christians. It also derives authority from its inclusion in the canon of scripture and the generations of knowledgeable, scholarly, prayerful reflection on it since then. This opening passage depicts Jesus as the cosmic pre-existent Christ who revealed to humankind the saving purposes of God. Anything more detailed must be left to be explored through the very many excellent commentaries that exist.

Friday 24th April.

Commemoration of Mellitus, 1st Bishop at St Paul’s, 624

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 4:15-24

Deuteronomy (meaning ‘*second law*’) probably has its origins in the time of reforms carried out by King Josiah in 622 BC, and is in the form of an extended valedictory oration by Moses (actually 3 long speeches) purporting to be his ‘final instructions’ for Israel before the conquest and occupation of the Promised Land. There is much repetition from Exodus and Leviticus, as Moses warns Israel about the temptations in Canaan and emphasises the importance of the people preserving their identity as God’s covenantal community.

Today’s reading is a sort of sermon which reinterprets the second of the 10 commandments (prohibiting idolatry), while also refining the first (to worship no Gods other than YHWH). The prohibition is expressed as applying to all images of any creatures and (in a passage which echoes the first creation account in Genesis 1, but in reverse order) all astral bodies

(sun, moon, and stars). This double prohibition dissolves the distinction between the 1st and 2nd commandments – the very existence of other gods is not countenanced. Moses then, with the experience of suffering personal punishment (he will not enter the Promised Land) as the result of communal disobedience, warns of the consequences of failure to keep the covenant.

New Testament lesson: 21:15-19

There is wide scholarly agreement that Ch.21 of John's gospel was added somewhat later than completion of the rest of the book. However, it continues the themes of the continuation of the disciples' mission and their continuing dependence on the (now risen) Christ. There is also the question of Peter's failings, which have been left in the air: his three-fold denial of Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest [18:15-27] and, at the empty tomb, his lack of comprehension (unlike the Beloved Disciple) of its full implications [20:80-9]. In this reading, he is rehabilitated.

Jesus addresses him, first, as 'Simon' – his original name; an indication of the need to re-establish their relationship. Peter ignores the comparative nature of Jesus' question (whether his love for Jesus is greater than that of the other disciples) and appeals to the sovereign knowledge of Jesus (who had known that he would deny him). The three affirmations mirror the three denials. Jesus' instructions to Peter to feed/tend Jesus' lambs/sheep show that Peter must continue Jesus' work as the good shepherd who is prepared to lay down his life for his sheep [10:11-18]. In that connection, Peter's own crucifixion is foretold.

Thursday 23rd April, commemoration of George, C4th martyr and patron of England

Both today's readings relate to the use of metaphor: the 'Suffering Servant' in Isaiah and Jesus as the 'true vine' in John's gospel. It may be worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the use of imagery and metaphor when thinking about God. We have no difficulty when looking at a painting to see beyond the pigment and canvas. We allow music, which in terms of explicit meaning, is abstract, to stir our deepest intuitions. George Herbert put it wonderfully well in his poem *The Elixir* (which is also no.240 in Hymns Ancient and Modern):

*A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And there the heav'n espy.*

Of course, that poem begins: *Teach me, my God and King, /in all things thee to see*. We can ask ourselves, therefore, in relation to scripture, once we have absorbed the words on the page (which may or may not be literally, historically true), whether we can look through those words to the richness of meaning and truth to which they point.

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 43:1-7

This passage comes in Deutero or Second Isaiah, in which the prophet addresses the people of Israel who are exiled in Babylon. It comes in the course of the much debated Servant Songs, the servant (arguably, and possibly more) standing both for disobedient Israel and the means of its deliverance. The condition of the people has just been attributed to their infidelity and wilful spiritual blindness and deafness. But this is an oracle of reassurance and salvation. In spite of it all, God says to His people, "Do not fear, for I am with you". The Christian understanding is that this points forward to salvation in Christ.

New Testament: John 15:15:1-8

This the last of "I am" sayings in John's gospel ('bread of life' [6:35], 'light of the world' [8:12], 'gate' [10:9], 'good shepherd' [10:11], 'resurrection and the life' [11:25], 'the way, the truth, and the life' [14:6], and 'true vine' [15:1]). They can be understood as the

evangelist, rather than actually quoting Jesus, saying (as the result of deep theological reflection) “Jesus is”. From the burning bush, God identified himself to Moses by the profoundly enigmatic, “I AM WHO I AM” [Exodus 3:14] – echoed by Jesus saying “before Abraham was, I am” [John 8:58]. The metaphor of the vine resounds with deep Old Testament reference. In the ancient world, the three most common fruit-bearing trees were the olive, the fig, and the vine. Israel is repeatedly depicted as God’s vineyard (e.g. Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 19:10-14, Psalm 80:8-19). Wine is associated with abundance, gladness, and conviviality. For disciples to ‘bear fruit’ (joyfully nourishing themselves and the world), to the glory of God, they (we) must be in a right relationship of love (mutual indwelling), which might be expressed as an eternal circle of integrated harmony: Father>Son>disciples>Son>Father (to use another metaphor!). Immediately after this passage, Jesus additionally commands the disciples that they must love one another, as he has loved them [15:12].

Wednesday 22nd April 2020

The Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 3:18-29

Deuteronomy (meaning ‘*second law*’) is the last of the five books of ‘the Law’ (the Pentateuch). It probably has its origins in the time of reforms carried out by King Josiah (the only king to get an unqualifiedly good press) in 622 BC, which were inspired by the discovery in the Temple of a ‘scroll of the Torah’. It is in the form of an extended valedictory oration by Moses, in large part rehearsing legal provisions, which are also to be found in Exodus and Leviticus, within a narrative framework of the violent conquest of the Promised Land (please see the notes for 21st April 2020 which refer to the challenge for Christians presented by the portrayal of God in this part of scripture).

Before today’s reading, Moses has recited a history of military victory and the division of the occupied land amongst certain tribes of Israel (‘occupied’, as nomadic Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had never possessed the land where they lived). He gives further instructions. It seems that the military success has been such as to make it safe for families and livestock to be left in captured towns, while the troops set off for further conquest. Joshua unequivocally replaces Moses as leader, while the latter is punished by God for Israel’s earlier disobedience by being able only to see the Promised Land (unlike Joshua, who will enter it). A fully monotheistic idea of God has not yet developed – the Lord is said to be greater than other gods, rather than being the only God [v.24].

The New Testament Lesson: John 20:19-31

Jesus appears to the disciples (John says in a locked room - emphasising that he is no longer confined by earthly space). Having said “*Peace be with you*” (both a conventional greeting and an assurance of greater peace than that provided by locked doors), Jesus commissions the disciples to continue his mission (“*As the Father sent me, so I send you*”) and, literally, inspires them, recalling the creation narrative in Genesis 2:7 and the vision in Ezekiel 37:5-10 (“*he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’*”), giving them the authority to forgive sins. There is then the famous story of Thomas’ doubts. It is worth noting that Thomas’ real problem is that he has not believed the testimony of the other disciples and his movement from unbelief to belief is not because he has touched Christ’s wounds (contrary to many depictions of this scene, he does not actually do so) but that Christ offers himself for that to happen. Thomas’ reaction is the recognition of Jesus’ true identity, which John has made clear to the reader from the opening words of his gospel and by which those who read it, but have not seen Christ, may also come to believe. Many scholars believe that vv.30-31 were, originally, the conclusion of the gospel.

21st April, in the Season of Easter

Deuteronomy 1:19-21, 26-28, 34-40

Moses reminds the Hebrews that God has given them the land of the Amorites which they are to take by violent conquest. He rebukes them for being unwilling to obey, for fear that the Amorites would prevail. He then tells them of God's wrath at their disobedience which is such that they will be punished by failure. Faithfulness will, however, secure future success for Caleb, Joshua, and the next generation.

This raises the perennially difficult question of how Christians should read such passages – which include, for example, Moses' instruction to commit genocide: *But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive.* [Deuteronomy 20:16]. This is a huge topic but it cannot just be shrugged aside: Jesus took (what we call) the Old Testament very seriously. Some Christians say that these accounts are true history, in infallible scripture, and that the bloody conquests were to carry out God's commands; His purpose being to cleanse the area of polytheistic, idolatrous (and worse) religious practices. Others will say that such a view gives validity to Richard Dawkins' description of the God of the Old Testament as “arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction”. They will point to, in particular: the fact that Deuteronomy was written centuries after the events described, for theological/political purposes particular to the time of its composition; the lack of historical support from other sources (literary or archaeological); and the inconsistency with Jesus' command: “I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” [Luke 6:27].

If Jesus took the Old Testament seriously, so must we. Christians will want to ask themselves whether it is all to be read literally, or as a record of diverse, flawed, and developing discernments of God, unfolding towards fulfilment in Christ.

New Testament lesson: John 20.11-18

Mary Magdalene has discovered the empty tomb and told Peter and the “*disciple whom Jesus loved*”. They have seen it for themselves. In this reading, Mary seems to have accompanied the men and has been left by them at the tomb, weeping (as Jesus predicted in John 16:20). Looking into the tomb, she sees two angels (signifying that God has been at work) but, so absorbed is she by grief, she speaks to them apparently without fear or amazement. She then turns to see Jesus. There is ironic misunderstanding (typical of John's gospel) both in her thinking he is the gardener and also asking him the whereabouts of his own body. When he calls her by name, she recognises him (as a sheep recognises the voice of the shepherd – a reference to John 10.3-5). Jesus tells her not to try to hold onto him, as he is on his way to the Father (John depicts Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, ascent/return to the Father, and glorification as, essentially, one event - later resurrection appearances will be of the ascended Jesus). Unlike Thomas [John 20.27], Mary Magdalene's faith does not depend upon physical contact. Her account to the disciples is an echo of the account of the Samaritan woman (met by Jesus at the well) to the people of her city [John 4.39].

You might like to look at the famous Titian of this episode in the National Gallery *Noli me Tangere*:

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/titian-noli-me-tangere>

Easter Season, Monday 20th April

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 1:9-18

Deuteronomy (meaning ‘*second law*’) is the last of the five books of ‘the Law’ (the Pentateuch). It probably has its origins in the time of reforms carried out by King Josiah (the only king to get an unqualifiedly good press) in 622 BC, which were inspired by the discovery in the Temple of a ‘scroll of the Torah’. It is in the form of an extended valedictory oration by Moses, in large part rehearsing legal provisions, which are also to be found in Exodus and Leviticus, within a narrative framework. Today's reading follows God's

exhortation to enter the promised land. Moses tells the people that, because he cannot bear the burdens of leadership alone, he has instituted a strikingly enlightened system of governance, deriving from the people's consent. Wise, reputable leaders, for every level of society have been chosen by the people. The importance of impartial justice is emphasised – justice equally available to rich and poor, and irrespective of ethnicity.

New Testament: John 20:1-10

This is John's account of the discovery of the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb – we are not told why. It was not to anoint the body as, by John's account, that had already been done by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. She goes when it is dark – darkness often being deployed by John to symbolise doubt and unbelief (Nicodemus comes out of the dark to visit Jesus early in the gospel; Judas goes into the dark to betray him). The absence of the stone is enough to persuade her that the body has been taken. There is a race to the tomb between Peter (is he representative of the wider, 'great' church?) and the Beloved Disciple (is he portrayed as both representative of ideal discipleship, having greater insight than Peter, and the community from which John's gospel came?). That the linen cloths are still in the tomb distinguishes what has happened from the raising of Lazarus and precludes grave robbers as an explanation.

The Friday in Easter Week 17th April 2020

Old Testament lesson: 2 Kings 5:1-3; 9-15a

The Aramean general, Naaman, is cured of his leprosy by following Elisha's instructions.

New Testament lesson: Luke 8:41-end

Jesus heals the woman who has suffered haemorrhages for 12 years and restores to life the 12 year old daughter of Jairus (a synagogue leader).

The Lectionary has, for the New Testament, turned back from encounters with the risen Christ, to Jesus' earthly ministry of healing and restoring life. I have also chosen an Old testament healing story: that of Naaman and Elisha.

Notice the nature of those helped in these and other stories, outsiders or disadvantaged: an Aramean general, a gentile centurion and his slave, poor widows and their only sons, a 12 year old girl and her father, and a woman socially and religiously excluded by her continual bleeding. They show humility (Naaman after a struggle with his pride), faithfulness, and response to love.

Of course, those who are restored to life will again suffer earthly death – like Lazarus [John 11:1-45] and like those in the desert saved by Moses after they had been killed by snake bites [Numbers 21:4-9]. We may take from these texts the idea that spiritual healing and restored spiritual vitality, are open to us in this life, if founded upon a right relationship with God.

Thursday in Easter Week 16th April 2020

The Lectionary takes us back from resurrection appearances to Jesus' earthly mission, and the unfolding of who he is, in the story (unique to Luke) of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain [Luke 7:11-17]. This comes immediately Jesus has healed, at a distance, the centurion's sick slave. The faith of the centurion is contrasted with the lack of faith 'in Israel'. There is no prior declaration of faith by the widow of Nain, as Jesus encounters the funeral procession. He raises her son out of compassion – not only is the woman a widow, the dead man is her only son (thus, she would be completely dependent on him). Pairing a story of a rich man with a

poor woman is typical of Luke. The crowd hails Jesus as a great prophet (doubtless recalling Elijah's raising to life the only son of the widow of Zarephath – today's Old Testament reading [1 Kings 17:17-24]). They have not understood his true nature – revealed to the reader by Luke in v.13 when he refers to Jesus, for the first time, as “the Lord”.

Wednesday in Easter Week 15th April 2020

The Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 52:7-10, 13-15.

This is the prelude to and beginning of the last of the Servant Songs. It has received much analytical scrutiny. For Christians, the portrayal of the servant concerns Christ. The servant suffers oppression and a violent death but will be vindicated and exalted, ‘lifted up’, demonstrating the universal reach of his sovereignty. John the evangelist puts strikingly similar words on the lips of Jesus, referring to his crucifixion and universal mission: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” [John 12:32].

The New Testament lesson: Matthew 28:16-end]

Extends this theme. The risen Christ commissions the 11 remaining disciples to be instruments of His mission to make disciples of the whole world. It is a commission directed, across the centuries, to us.

Tuesday in Easter Week 14th April 2020

When Jesus was crucified, his suffering was not only a matter of excruciating physical pain. There was also the psychological pain of rejection by many of the very people he came to save.

The Old Testament lesson: Psalm 118:19-25, 29

In which we find the metaphor of the cornerstone, wrongly rejected by the original builders. In the gospels of Matthew [21:42] and Mark [12:10-11], Jesus associates this with himself. The movement of which he is the cornerstone will outlast the established religion of his day. And, of course, by the time the gospels were written, the Jerusalem Temple itself had been physically destroyed by the Romans, never to be rebuilt.

The New Testament lesson: Luke 24:1-12

Luke's account of the discovery of the empty tomb.

Monday in Easter Week 13th April 2020

Inevitably, Easter Week is a little anti-climactic after the tightening of tension during Holy Week, the paradox of humiliating suffering and glory on Good Friday, and the resurrection joy of Easter Day. But there is still much to reflect upon. In particular, when we consider the state of affairs immediately after the discovery of the empty tomb, how did it come about that a movement which began with a handful of demoralised, terrified Galileans grow to a faith to be followed by billions – by far the largest of the world's religions?

The Old Testament lesson: Psalm 22:1-5; 23-24

According to the gospels of Matthew [27:46] and Mark [15:34] Jesus quoted the first verse of this psalm as he cried out from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is worth noting, as Jesus would have known, that Psalm 22 is a both a plea for deliverance and trust that the plea would be answered.

The New Testament lesson: Mark 16:1-8

This is Mark’s characteristically terse account of the women discovering the empty tomb. The demoralised male disciples are nowhere to be seen. The women’s terrified reaction, understandable though it may have been, is consistent with Mark’s theme of divine command and human failing.

Good Friday 10th April 2020

Evening Prayer, today, will differ from the usual act of worship, having at its heart a long passage from John’s gospel, the whole of Ch.19. To put the reading in context, you might like first to read Ch.18, which depicts Jesus’ arrest, Peter’s denial, Jesus’ interrogation by High Priest Caiaphas, and Pilate’s initial finding of acquittal.

John the evangelist is the master of irony and its cousin, paradox – both of which are distinctive features of this account, subtler, richer and more multi-layered than unrelieved desolation.

Jesus suffers an appalling injustice, being convicted by a judge who finds no case against him, and then is mocked, tortured, and executed in a way which is intended not only to be physically agonising but to be very publicly so, sending an unmistakable message to the world. It is, indeed, a message to the world but one which is completely different to that intended. As John has repeatedly prefigured, the hour of Jesus’ death is also that of his glorification (and that of the Father). Throughout, he is in sovereign control - really a king, but one whose kingdom is not of this world. The crucifixion is also a coronation.

John insists that Jesus carried the cross by himself [John 19:17]. On the cross, he wills the fulfilment of scripture [Ps 69:21] in his request for drink. He brings together the Beloved Disciple and his mother (epitomes of witness and those receptive to Christ’s saving message – ideal representatives of Christian faith) as the new family of believers. His words (“*It is finished*” [v.30]) are a declaration of achievement; he has now accomplished all that he was sent by the Father to do. He gives up his spirit (“*I have the power to lay [my life] down, and I have the power to take it up again.*” [John 10:18]), imparting that spirit to the faithful round the cross.

Maundy Thursday 9th April 2020

The word ‘Maundy’ comes from John’s rendering of Jesus’ love command, given in the context of the Last Supper. “I give you a new commandment” [that you love one another] is, in Latin, “**Mandatum** novum do vobis ...”

Short passages from scripture, which can be read during an act of worship, cannot do full justice to the depth of John's account of Jesus' actions and teaching immediately before his trial and crucifixion. You might like to take some time to read for yourselves John's gospel from Ch 13 to what is called the High Priestly Prayer in Ch 17. Unlike the other gospels, John puts on the lips of Jesus lengthy farewell discourses, which reveal more fully his nature, mission, and relationship with the Father.

Today's readings:

Old Testament: Exodus 12:1-4; 11-14

By today's Old Testament lesson, the focus shifts from restoration after the Babylonian exile to liberation from bondage in Egypt (commemorated by the Passover festival). Both can stand as metaphors for liberation from oppression and sin. Moses, has been called by YHWH (the Lord) from the burning bush and has returned to Egypt to deliver his people from bondage there. Today's reading concerns the culmination of preparations for flight and the institution of the ritual Passover Meal. Moses receives precise instructions involving every aspect of the meal. This will, forever, remind the people of the bitter years in Egypt and the manner of their deliverance. 'Passover' refers to YHWH passing over the houses of His people, marked with the blood of the Passover lambs, as he wreaks vengeance on the Egyptians.

New Testament: John 13:33-38

John's gospel connects Jesus' last day with the Passover in a different way to that found in the other ('synoptic') gospels. In John, the Last Supper is not a Passover meal and the crucifixion takes place on day of Preparation - the day when the Passover lambs were slaughtered. In today's reading, Jesus' great love command expresses the significance of his washing his disciples' feet (followed by an instruction that they must do the same for each other). It is an act of love which overturns conventional ideas of status. Jesus is explicit ("Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another" [v.34]): reciprocal love between the disciples is founded on his own love for them and, by that reciprocal love, everyone will know that they are his disciples. A commandment which, across the centuries, is addressed by John's gospel to us.

Jesus also predicts Peter's threefold denial of him – something which will be put right, according to the account of Peter's encounter with the risen Christ on the shore of Lake Tiberias [John 21:1-23].

Wednesday of Holy Week 8th April 2020

Today's readings:

Old Testament: Isaiah 50.4-9

This passage is from Deutero or Second Isaiah in which the prophet addresses the people who are exiled in Babylon, but Jerusalem has become the centre of attention. This passage is from the third of a sequence of the four 'servant songs'. The Christian reading is clear. The 'servant' is a messianic figure with a mission to restore the people of God. He is also a 'light for the Gentiles', through whom salvation will be brought to the whole world. The 'servant' has God-given powers to teach and sustain the weary but he will be oppressed, mocked, and reviled. However, he will staunchly persist and be vindicated by God.

New Testament: John 13:21-32

This reading comes from John's description of the Last Supper. Jesus, knowing that Judas will betray him and that he will shortly be returning to the Father who sent him, has washed his disciples' feet and has said they ought to do the same for each other. Jesus' humanity is shown by his spirit being troubled [v.21]; nonetheless, he is in sovereign control. In a sign of intimacy

and friendship, he dips a piece of bread into a sauce and gives it to his betrayer; then he instructs Judas to, “*Do quickly what you are going to do*” [v.27]. Symbolically, Judas goes out into the night (as, near the beginning of the gospel, the leading Pharisee, Nicodemus, comes out of the night into the light of Jesus’ presence [John 3:1-21]). Disrupting ideas of strict chronology (‘eternal’ means ‘outside time’ – having neither beginning nor end), Jesus then mixes present, past, and future tenses in proclaiming His and the Father’s glory.

The Tuesday of Holy Week 7th April 2020

In the Gospel of John, we are following the last week of the earthly ministry of Jesus. John’s Gospel is distinctive in the clarity with which what seems to be the world’s judgement of Jesus is shown to be, in reality, a cosmic trial in which it is the world which is judged. From the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus has foretold how he will die. Here, he describes how the moment of his death will also be his glorification.

Isaiah 49.1-7

This reading is from the second part of Isaiah in which Judah’s enslavement by Babylon and subsequent deliverance is anticipated. It is the second of what are called the ‘Servant Songs’. The ‘servant’ is called by YHWH (The LORD) before he is even born. He will fulfil his mission by the spoken word. He will not just restore fallen Israel but will be “*a light to the gentiles*” – salvation with universal reach. These words are familiar to us from the Nunc Dimittis – the song Simeon sang when the infant Jesus was presented in the Temple. Christians have traditionally seen this as a prophesy relating to Jesus.

New Testament: John 12:20-36a

After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is visited by “*some Greeks*” - the coming of Gentiles into his believing community demonstrates the universal scope of Jesus’ saving death; this is reinforced by v.32, “*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.*” There are paradoxes, typical of the Gospel of John. Jesus, the *Word* [John 1:1], the eternal, pre-existent, creative rationality and wisdom “*made flesh*” [John 1:14], nonetheless has a soul which is momentarily “*troubled*” by the prospect of his earthly death. Foreshadowing “*the kind of death he was to die*” [v.33], Jesus depicts his crucifixion as, simultaneously, earthly death and glorification. On one level, Jesus is judged and condemned by the world; on another level, a cosmic trial is unfolding, at the culmination of which the crucified, “*lifted up*” Jesus judges the world for its alienation from, and opposition to, God. Contrasting light and darkness, Jesus, the light of the world, is not only the light which may be seen, but the light by which everything else may be seen and understood.

Evening Prayer: Monday of Holy Week 6th April 2020

Yesterday was Palm Sunday and I cannot quite let that pass without referring to G.K. Chesterton’s poem *The Donkey* – its point being the value of the unlovely, despised, and outcast. Its anthropomorphism teeters perilously on the edge of kitsch, but it is curiously moving.

The Donkey

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry

And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

Something else written by Chesterton (a Catholic convert) suggests another important insight: that coming to Christian faith is, generally, not a matter of being struck by a thunderbolt, or a cosmic email pinging into one's spiritual inbox, or being intellectually persuaded of a series of theological propositions. It is a matter of participation in a lived, shared experience. He said this:

“the best way to see if a coat fits a man is not to measure both of them, but to try it on”.

In order for the story of Holy Week to unfold, I will use the readings for principal services, which means some repetition of lessons from last week (which repay rereading).

Today's readings

Old Testament: Isaiah 42:1-9

This passage comes in Deutero/Second Isaiah, in which the prophet addresses the people who are exiled in Babylon. It is the first of the poems called *The Servant Songs*. The identity of the 'servant' is much debated. Christians have understood it to refer to Jesus as Messiah (see Matthew 12.18-21). The prophet anticipates the coming of a saving servant of God, a 'light to the nations', by whom, after he has suffered, everything will be made new and justice established universally.

New Testament lesson: John 12:1-11

Mary, the sister of Lazarus anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and dries them with her hair. This is an example of the importance of women in John's gospel. Mary's extravagant act reflects Jesus' forthcoming sacrifice and contrasts with the mean dishonesty of Judas.

3rd April 2020

We have been reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, the Old Testament lessons set for this week. The context is the trauma of suffering, displacement, and alienation caused by the Babylonian exile and captivity. It is not surprising that the slaves of the southern states of America drew the exile as analogous to their own condition of oppression. This led to an extraordinary musical phenomenon. There is a particular song to which I want to draw your attention: 'Down to the River to Pray'. Its dignity, humility, forbearance, and hope – considering the hellish circumstances from which it emerged – are truly awe inspiring. It speaks timelessly to all suffering captivity, physical or spiritual. It is beautifully performed by the American bluegrass singer, Alison Krauss:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbgfQ48hWuY>.

Notice the fleeting glimpse, at the very end, of her beatific smile, as she turns to the gospel choir, knowing that they have absolutely nailed it. But notice, too, that the choir is entirely

white – an unsettling reminder of the enduring consequences of long shadow cast by the evils of slavery and segregation.

Today's readings:

Old Testament: Jeremiah 24

Jeremiah lays about him once more. This time (deploying the imagery of good and bad figs), he attacks those who have stayed in Judah, collaborating with the Babylonian invaders, and those who have fled for safety to Egypt, while extolling those taken into captivity in Babylon. The key distinction is the changed 'heart' – other words, complete inner reorientation towards God, as opposed to mechanistic religious observance.

New Testament: John 12:20-36a

This is a famously difficult passage, which you may want to read and reread for yourselves. Here are some themes which you may want to think about. Jesus is visited by Gentiles (Greeks), showing the universal reach of his mission. There are paradoxes. Love of earthly life results in loss of eternal life. The world apparently judges Jesus, but in truth Jesus is the cosmic judge of the world. In the apparent degradation and rejection of crucifixion, in reality, Jesus will be lifted up in glory and draw all people to him. Jesus, the light of the world, is not only the light which may be seen, but the light by which everything else may be seen and understood.

2nd April 2020

The climax of Jesus' earthly ministry is approaching. Today's readings are searing indictments of the religious authorities of Jeremiah's and Jesus' day. The New Testament lesson depicts Jesus' entry to Jerusalem. Holy Week begins on Sunday.

Religious truth is not only expressed in words; other forms of expression – such as music - can do this. During Holy Week, as the drama unfolds, you may like to listen to Alexander Grechaninov's *Passion Week, Op.58*. There is a much acclaimed recording on Chandos – compelling Russian Orthodox liturgy, underpinned by cavernous basses, sounding like distant rolling thunder.

This wonderful music can be downloaded (no need to wait for a CD) and, for all I know [!] may be listened to Spotify.

Today's readings:

Old Testament: Jeremiah 23:23-32

Jeremiah lets fly at the institutional prophets who, falsely claiming to speak for God, complacently affirm the *status quo* (reminding us how radical and subversive authentic, truthful religious expression can be). Jeremiah dismisses their interpretation of the national crisis (the imminence of the Babylonian exile), to which their failures have contributed. God's intimate presence means that He knows who is making false claims in His name.

New Testament: John 12:12-19

The raising of Lazarus and the impact on those who hear about it, has provoked the religious authorities to activate their long-held intention to have Jesus killed. Their fears are reinforced by the tumultuous acclamation of the crowd, as Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey in apparent fulfilment of a royal arrival prophesied in Zechariah 9:9.

1st April 2020

Yesterday's reading of John Donne has sent me back to his Divine Poems and in particular to a cycle of sonnets called *La Corona* – a co-incidentally resonant title at a time when the world is beset by a virus which has been given that name, because of the crown-like spikes on its surface. The contrast with that referred to by Donne could hardly be starker.

The sonnets endlessly progress, as the last line of each is the first line of the next, and the end of the last sonnet is the first line of the first. The spiritual journey folds back on itself – the last sonnet becoming the first. There is an intense exploration of the struggle of faith hard-won and the captivity by sin from which the poet aspires to be freed. I will read the first sonnet which ends with a declaration of the hope that all may be saved.

La Corona, Sonnet 1

*Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise,
Weav'd in my low devout melancholy,
Thou which of good, hast, yea art treasury,
All changing unchanged Ancient of days,
But do not, with a vile crown of frail bays,
Reward my muse's white sincerity,
But what thy thorny crown gained, that give me,
A crown of Glory, which doth flower always;
The ends crown our works, but thou crown'st our ends,
For at our end begins our endlesse rest,
The first last end, now zealously possesst,
With a strong sober thirst, my soul attends.
'Tis time that heart and voice be lifted high,
*Salvation to all that will is nigh.**

New Testament lesson: John 12:1-11

Mary, the sister of Lazarus anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and dries them with her hair. This is an example of the importance of women in John's gospel. Mary's extravagant act reflects Jesus' forthcoming sacrifice and contrasts with the mean dishonesty of Judas.

31st March 2020

Today, the Church of England commemorates John Donne, priest and poet. He lived from 1572 to 1631. He was a lawyer, courtier, and politician but then took holy orders, in due course becoming Dean of St Paul's. He wrote vivid metaphysical poetry – at first about erotic love; latterly, deeply religious.

Instead of an Old Testament lesson today, I will read one of his most famous holy sonnets, which in a brilliant metaphysical conceit, draws on sexual imagery.

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,

Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

New Testament: John 11:45-End

After the raising of Lazarus, the religious leaders in Jerusalem decide that Jesus must be killed. The high priest, referring to the threat from the Romans says to his colleagues, "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." This is richly ironic. The death of Jesus involves cosmic salvation.

30th March 2020

The use, here, of the Book of Common Prayer is not intended to be instead of flexible, accessible, excellent contemporary liturgy, but to complement it. The sublime poetry is not only beautiful, it is packed with meaning which unfolds on repeated hearing, while leaving a sense of mystery - the sense that even when we have understood, we have not reached the end. By this, it points to the transcendent realm, beyond time and space and on which time and space depends: the eternal transcendent realm of beauty, meaning, value, purpose, creativity, rationality, and love.

Why not prepare with a two minute glimpse of heaven as the Ely Cathedral Lay Clerks sing *If ye Love Me* by Thomas Tallis: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WSe0kv6lCU>

Today's readings:

Old Testament: Jeremiah 21:1-10

This reading is tough for modern readers. The context of its composition needs to be born in mind – the Babylonian exile. How had God allowed his chosen people to suffer so grievously? Zedekiah has been installed by the Babylonians as a puppet king in Jerusalem but, behind their backs, has done a deal with the Egyptians. This means war with Nebuchadrezzar. Zedekiah sends corrupt priests to the incorruptible Jeremiah, hoping that he will be able to reassure them. But Jeremiah spells out the dire consequences of Jerusalem's unfaithfulness.

New Testament: John 11:28-44

The raising of Lazarus is the crowning 'sign' of Jesus' ministry, revealing him to be the giver of life by an act which, paradoxically, precipitates his own death.