

St Leonard's, Glapthorn

Evening Prayer – Scripture Notes

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Ecclesiasticus 18.1-14

This book is not to be confused with Ecclesiastes, as the BBC managed to do more than once during the funeral of Prince Philip. Ecclesiasticus was accepted as canonical by the Roman Church but by Protestant tradition is part of the Apocrypha (which means 'hidden things'). 'Ecclesiasticus', meaning 'the Church's book', is the Latin title. It is also called 'The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach'. The author is usually referred to as 'Ben Sira'. He seems to have been a Jewish teacher, writing in Jerusalem in the first quarter of the C2nd BC, shortly before the Maccabean revolt. Its central theme is wisdom, which is understood as fear of the Lord, itself a discipline which will fulfil the law. This wisdom, therefore, is not primarily concerned with the minutiae of cultic ritual observance or following prescriptive dietary rules. As Ben Sira writes in 6.18, *'My child, from your youth choose discipline, and when you have grey hair you will still find wisdom'*. It is argued by some scholars that Ben Sira drew on sources beyond Hebrew scripture and tradition, including Homer, Stoicism, and Epicureanism. The focus is on wisdom acquired and practised in this life, not looking to reward or punishment beyond death (something Ben Sira explores in Ch.41). Today's reading is an exultant hymn of praise to God's omnipotence and mercy. It seems to acknowledge the validity of the Lord's majestic rebuke to Job in Ch.38., when 'out of the whirlwind' He answers Job's complaints about unjust suffering: *'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?'* [Job 38.4]. Unlike the passage in Job, in this reading God's awesome, unimaginable power is balanced by His mercy. However, in a surprising twist in v.14, the exercise of mercy unexpectedly seems to depend upon submission to God's discipline and eagerness for God's precepts.

New Testament lesson: Luke 10.38-42

This is the story of the sisters Martha and Mary. Some may think that it is one of the comparatively few biblical stories into which we may enter imaginatively without too much risk of anachronistically imposing C21st English experiences onto events reported from C1st Palestine. The dutiful Martha's irritation at having to do all the work, while her sister Mary sits listening to Jesus, has the ring of an essentially true story and one with universal resonance. Though it seems a bit hard on Martha, it is a story about priority. Even the demands of hospitality and household duties should not take precedence over the need to listen to the word of God. A broader point can be made about giving too much priority to the nuts and bolts of church life. These are important but should not get in the way of, as Jesus puts it, 'the need of only one thing' [Luke 10.42]. It should not be overlooked that this story also illustrates the importance of women as disciples from the very start of the Jesus movement.

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 28.1-14

Although 'Deuteronomy' means 'second law', today's is from part of the book which demonstrates that its development was far more complex than, as it were, two editions. There has been extremely lengthy rehearsal, said to be by Moses, of the laws to be followed by Israel, as it takes possession of the promised land. We now come to a passage which may, in literary form, replicate an established liturgical practice of a ceremonial remaking of the covenant by which Israel is constituted. It has a rhythmical, repetitive form which is characteristic of liturgy. It may date from after the Babylonian exile, and therefore long after the rewriting of laws which took place many centuries after the events described in Deuteronomy. Ch.28 consists of recitation of blessings and curses. Today's reading contains only blessings. The curses that

follow may be the result of the disaster of the Babylonian exile being attributed to Israel's disobedience. However, we should not derive from this a simple message of reward for good behaviour and punishment for bad. There is continual dialectic going on between, and even within, the books of the Old Testament, a sense of scripture arguing with itself. The covenant marked by a rainbow after the flood is not said to be conditional. The blameless Job suffers horribly. However badly Israel's stiff-necked people behave, they are never decisively abandoned by God.

New Testament lesson: Acts 28.17-31

Last week, we left Paul under house arrest in Rome. These are the concluding verses of the book of Acts. Paul preaches to members of the Roman Jewish community. Having had no news from Judea about the new Jesus-movement, but knowing that it has been widely criticised, they want to hear about it. Paul tries to convince them about Jesus in terms of "*the law of Moses and from the prophets*". He has mixed success. He quotes Isaiah Ch.6 on the theme of rejection. He tells them that the message of salvation has also been sent to the Gentiles and that (unlike many Jews) they will listen. The story ends abruptly. It is not clear what happened next to Paul. There is some support for the view that he went on a fourth, unrecorded, missionary journey. It is possible that he perished during Nero's persecution of Christians (it may be that Luke hints at Paul's death in Acts Ch.20). But nobody knows.

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 24.10-22

The extensive recitation of God's laws and ordinances continues. As we have seen, although the literary form deployed is that of a valedictory address by Moses to Israel in the desert, the laws presume a settled, mostly agrarian people. Today's reading makes this especially clear as it presumes houses with neighbours, towns, a system of monetary exchange, the presence of non-Israelite incomers, cultivated fields, and well-established vineyards. The laws are detailed and practical, promoting the idea that external ethical practice reinforces internally experienced faith. The ethics are generous, sophisticated, and underpinned by care for the disadvantaged, even if they do not belong to one's own kind. The passage about capital punishment may strike a stern note but, by the standards of the time, it was merciful and just in providing that only the personally guilty should be punished and not those who happen to be related to them. Ethical commands are reinforced by reminders of Israel's providential release from Egyptian bondage.

New Testament lesson: Acts 28.1-16

The indomitable Paul has been shipwrecked on Malta. Today's reading describes the wintry months spent there, followed by the final stages of the journey to Rome. In it are to be found the last references to 'we' – as if the narrator was actually present. There is considerable scholarly disagreement about this. Some hold that Luke really was with Paul, others that shifting between the first and third person was not unusual in writing at that time and that this was a literary device to heighten a sense of urgency at certain points in the narrative. An odd feature of the story is that the centurion, Julius, the Roman soldiers, and the ship's crew all mysteriously disappear – they are never mentioned again. Paul is doubly misunderstood. First, when he is bitten by a snake, the inhabitants of Malta believe him to be a murderer, who having escaped from the sea is now receiving his just deserts. When it becomes clear that Paul is unharmed, they then think him to be a god. The healing miracles which follow show he is neither – Paul's prayers indicate that the healing is by God, albeit through him. The story of the snake may be an echo of a passage in Luke's gospel where Jesus, addressing 70 disciples, says, 'See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.' [Luke 10.19]. When he finally reaches Rome, Paul's reception there reveals the ambiguity of his situation. He is greeted by numerous believers but, though he is allowed to live by himself, he is guarded by a soldier.

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 15.1-11

As we have seen in earlier weeks, the book of *Deuteronomy*, or 'second law', is in the form of an extended rehearsal by Moses of God's laws, decrees, and commands, to be obeyed as Israel prepares to enter the promised land. Though they are set in the context of desert wanderings, many are for the regulation of a settled agrarian society. Today's reading is a clear example of this, concerning the remission of debts, in particular those owed by neighbouring farmers, which were incurred to help them survive until the next harvest. The exclusion of foreigners, outside the ambit of the covenant, may jar modern sensibilities. However, the sheer antiquity of the text, something like the C7th BC and incorporating even earlier material, needs to be borne in mind. Furthermore, there is a strong sense developing ethical sophistication. The commands to relieve all needs, including poverty, comes close to the general commandment to love your neighbour, to be found in Leviticus 19.18 and identified by Jesus as the second of the two commandments on which '*hang all the law and the prophets*' [e.g. Matthew 22.39].

New Testament lesson: Acts 27.33-44

Paul is on his final journey to Rome, with other prisoners, in a grain ship. It has been a perilous voyage, beset by bad weather. Paul has been continually ignored by the sailors but is increasingly respected by Julius, the centurion in charge of the prisoners. After an especially violent storm, all seems lost but Paul rallies those on board, reassuring them that they will all survive. He commands a meal, which both has eucharistic overtones and points to the prospect that they will live, despite the peril. A plan by the soldiers to kill the prisoners (for whom they were responsible at the potential cost of their own lives) is thwarted by Julius. Though the ship gets stuck on rocks, everyone makes it safely ashore. Underlying, symbolic meaning can be found in this story. The Greek word for 'salvation', *soteria/σωτηρια*, can be used in a physical or spiritual sense. The meal is a sign of hope. Throughout scripture, turbulent waters represent the forces of chaos, to which only God can bring order. Natural tumult is associated with tumultuous, disobedient human behaviour. There is a striking example of this in Ps 65.5-7: '*By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, / O God of our salvation; / you are the hope of all the ends of the earth / and of the farthest seas. / By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. / You silence the roaring of the seas, / the roaring of their waves, / the tumult of the peoples.*' The Greek-speaking author of Acts also seems to have drawn on the language and imagery of Homer's *Odyssey*, an epic replete with catastrophe or near catastrophe at sea.

The Third Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 11.1-15

The Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy continues with its lengthy speech by Moses, preparing Israel for entry into the Promised Land. Obedience and recollection of the Lord's mighty power in delivering the people from Egyptian bondage are again stressed. Israel is reminded of the fate of the rebellious Dathan and Abiran (described in Numbers Ch.6). If the people keep the Lord's commandments, they are assured of the strength to occupy the land which will flow with milk and honey.

New Testament lesson: Acts 27.1-12

Paul has spent something like two years in custody and has had inconclusive trials or quasi-judicial hearings before a tribune, two procurators (Felix and Festus), and Agrippa (called a King, but little more than a satrap). Nothing is found against him to justify conviction but, as he has appealed to Rome, to Rome he must go. Paul now finds himself in the custody of a centurion called Julius. They put out to sea but it is a difficult voyage and they try to find a safe port where the ship can overwinter. The use of the first person plural implies that Luke (the

author of Acts) is present (though this is a matter of controversy among scholars). Julius is oblivious to Paul's words of warning. It is hardly surprising that a centurion would take little notice of a Jewish prisoner but, perhaps, the point is being made that the generally well-disposed centurion was more impressed by worldly than prophetic wisdom.

The Second Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 10.12-11.1

Deuteronomy is the last of the five books of 'the Law', taking the form of a lengthy speech by Moses, within a narrative framework, preparing Israel for entry into the land promised to Abraham. In today's reading, the Lord commands Moses to bring two more tablets of stone up the mountain (to replace the ones which were smashed) and make an ark to put them in. Moses does as he is told and God again writes on them the 10 commandments. There is then a passage, put in by priestly editors of the book, establishing the Levites' hereditary role of carrying the ark. What follows is a reassertion of the importance of obedience to the Lord's commandments in order to flourish. Unlike the 10 commandments, there is an emphasis on compassion and acts of charity resulting from a change of heart.

New Testament lesson: Acts 23.12-35

Paul has been rescued from the mob by a Roman tribune (a military officer) but is under arrest. He has revealed that he is a Roman citizen. The Jews who oppose him have been frustrated by the failure of Roman judicial process to do their work for them. They now swear an oath not to eat or drink until they kill him. This is literally a deadly affair – it is him or them. The tribune hears about the plot from Paul's nephew (that he has such easy access to the tribune implies Paul's preferential treatment). Arrangements are made for his transfer to the Roman governor's palace in Caesarea, accompanied by an implausibly large military escort. The governor, Felix, holds him pending the arrival of those who have been accusing him of profaning the temple.

The First Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 6.10-25

Deuteronomy is the last of the five books of 'the Law' (also called the Pentateuch). Its form developed from a code of law (much of which is also to be found in Exodus and Leviticus) to a lengthy oration by Moses, within a narrative framework. Today's reading comes just after the Deuteronomistic account of the decalogue – the 10 commandments. The focus is less on the nature of God than on the quality of Israel's relationship with Him. Moses warns against the temptations and complacency which may result from occupation of the promised land. The specific context is reflection on the implications of the first commandment: that Israel must have no gods other than the Lord who has delivered them from Egyptian bondage. The conditions into which God will bring them have all the marks of settled, prosperous civilisation – in stark contrast to the nomadic existence which they have endured in the years of desert wandering. To be spared God's wrath, the people must not test Him (as they did at Massah – the scene of mutinous grumbling which led to Moses striking a rock and releasing water for them to drink [Exodus 17.2-7]). And they must obey His decrees and statutes. Furthermore, they must secure the future by teaching their children the circumstances of the liberation from Egypt and the importance of obedience.

New Testament lesson: Acts 22.22-23.11

Paul has been set upon by a mob, stirred up by what are described as 'Jews from Asia' who accuse him of bringing Gentiles into the temple. He has been saved from them by a Roman tribune, a military officer, called Claudius Lysias [see Acts 23.26]. Paul is allowed to address the crowd again and recounts the story of his conversion and commission to convert the Gentiles. At this, the mob are enraged once more and Paul is again rescued by Roman soldiers; but only by being arrested. As he is about to be interrogated by being flogged, he reveals that

he is a Roman citizen. This has led to controversy. As Paul himself, in his letters, never suggests that he is a Roman citizen, it has been argued that Luke (the author of Acts) has invented this as a plot device to explain how it is that Paul ends up in Rome and, perhaps, to convey the idea that being a follower of Jesus is compatible with Roman life. Other scholars disagree. Reaching sure conclusions about the historicity of scripture can often be difficult as there is so little, other than scripture itself, to go on. At the tribune's request, the Jerusalem council convenes to question Paul. He calls the high priest a 'whitewashed wall' (drawing on an image from Ezekiel 13.10-15 – the idea being that whitewash or plaster is a metaphor for the words of false prophets which will dissolve when subjected to adversity). He then sets members of the council against each other (while reminding them that he is, himself, a Pharisee of some standing). Yet again, he is saved from being lynched by the intervention of Roman soldiers.

Trinity Sunday

Old Testament lesson: Ezekiel 1.4-10, 22-28a

As we have seen in earlier weeks, the priestly Ezekiel was one of those exiled to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 597 BC. In a series of bizarre visions, the fall of Jerusalem is attributed to the sins of the people and then the prophet anticipates return and restoration. Today's reading, from the first chapter, sets the tone. Ezekiel has the vision of an astonishing throne-chariot, bearing God and attended by fantastic, zoomorphic creatures. The clouds and fire from which it emerges are typical images of theophany – manifestations of God. The creatures' faces came to be associated with the Evangelists: human being:Matthew; lion:Mark; ox:Luke; and eagle:John. Above this amazing vehicle spreads the dome of heaven and above that God's throne. The omnidirectional mobility of the chariot shows that God is not confined to the Jerusalem temple, but has sovereignty with universal reach. That Ezekiel constantly deploys simile (something is like something else), conveys the idea that this extraordinary sight points to an impenetrable, transcendent reality which cannot be fully comprehended.

New Testament lesson: Revelation Ch.4

The New Testament lesson is also a vision of God's throne; and it draws explicitly on the imagery deployed by Ezekiel. St. John the Divine is invited to God's heavenly throne room and instantly, 'in the spirit' is there. Precious stones, a rainbow, thunder and lightning, and fire all evoke the splendour of that realm and the presence of God's heavenly being. That there are 24 elders may reflect the 12 tribes of Israel, with the addition of the 12 Apostles. The living creatures, which unceasingly extol the deity, have the appearances of human, lion, ox, and eagle. The elders cast their crowns before the throne in homage, showing that all authority and power comes from and must be returned to God. In this, they are unlike earthly rulers who seek to usurp God's sovereignty. The vision of the throne room shows that this is the ultimate reality beyond all earthly appearances. In heaven, God's sovereignty is acknowledged by the elders, as it will be on earth when the creator God renews His creation at the end of time. There was a powerfully moving illustration of the idea of all authority coming from and being returned to God at the recent funeral service of Prince Philip, a service which was devised by him. The insignia of his worldly titles and honours were all on the altar. An altar is the place where sacrificial gifts are laid. By this Prince Philip was giving all his worldly prestige, authority, and accomplishments to God.

Whit Sunday

Old Testament lesson: Ezekiel 36.22-28

Ezekiel was a member of a priestly family and was one of 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 are anticipated. Today's reading is from this section of the book (and comes immediately before the famous vision of the Valley of Dry

Bones). The idea is that Israel's disobedience has reflected badly on the Lord's reputation and prestige. Accordingly, Israel's restoration is not for Israel's sake but for the sake of the sanctity of the Lord's name. V.26 is pivotal. Whereas, Jeremiah has the Lord say, *'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts'* [Jeremiah 31:33], Ezekiel's understanding is even more dramatic, involving the replacement of the heart itself, bringing about a fundamental change of nature: *'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 Lord's restoration of Israel is unilateral and unconditional, not waiting for repentance. Startlingly, Ezekiel's understanding is that restoration is only a happy by-product of the Lord's self-vindication and, by this, hope is rooted in holiness rather than love.

New Testament lesson: Acts 2.22-38

Luke sets his account of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem at the time of the Feast of the Weeks. Perhaps, this is to explain the presence of people from all parts of the Jewish diaspora or to associate it with Jewish tradition connecting this festival with the giving of the Torah, the Law. Other than the wind and fire (classic Hebrew Bible theophanies, or manifestations of God), the mystery is heightened as the walls of the house in which the unspecified recipients of the Spirit are gathered seem to dissolve, as they are speaking in a variety of languages, and they find themselves amongst a polyglot crowd. Peter speaks, at first to answer the accusation that they are drunk. He quotes Joel, to set the event firmly in the context of Hebrew scripture. We then come to today's reading. Peter addresses 'Israelites' [v.22] and 'fellow Israelites' [v.29] and expresses Jesus' part in the unfolding of God's plan. This is quite complex. For example, the idea of Jesus receiving *'the promise of the Holy Spirit'* at the resurrection may be seen as inconsistent with Luke's account of the Holy Spirit coming on Jesus at his baptism [Luke 3.21-22]. Jesus is not really depicted as divine. The emphasis is on God the Father's actions and the fulfilment of His plan. This may reflect Luke drawing on more than one tradition. Peter's listeners ask him what they must do. His answer echoes the John the Baptist's cry for baptism and repentance [Luke 3.3]. It should be noted that the promised receipt of the Holy Spirit is not the necessary result of this. In support of this, later in Acts [10.44-8], the Holy Spirit descends on listeners to Peter before any repentance or baptism. The Spirit's independence is an important theme, subverting the idea that Christian faith is essentially to do with behaving well for fear of punishment or the hope of reward.

The Sunday after Ascension Day

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 61

Today's reading comes from Trito- or Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66). As we have seen in earlier weeks, these chapters appear to be from a time in Jerusalem, after the return from Babylonian exile, when restoration of the city and religious life was discouragingly difficult and there was uncertainty about the future. Accordingly, this section of the book looks forward to a vision of a purified people and a glorified Jerusalem, to which other nations will be drawn. In the chapter preceding today's lesson, there is a prophecy of restoration with Israelites, Judeans, and Gentiles all contributing to the rebuilding of Zion/Jerusalem which will surpass Solomon's in splendour. Chapter 61 anticipates the mission of a Messianic figure, endowed with the spirit of God, who will *"proclaim the year of the Lord's favour"*, bringing good news to the oppressed, the broken hearted, prisoners, and those who mourn. In Luke's gospel (today's New Testament reading) Jesus quotes the opening verses when preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth, at the start of his ministry [Luke 4.16-21]. It is said that *"strangers"* (Gentiles) will be to Judeans as the laity to priests and will be compensated for that which they have endured. The restored community will be blessed with land and descendants – beneficiaries of an everlasting covenant. The reading concludes with the community's hymn of thanks for these promised blessings. For obvious reasons, Christians have traditionally associated this prophetic figure with Christ. This is a long reading, but rather wonderful.

New Testament lesson: Luke 4.14-21

This passage comes immediately after Luke's account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. In it, Luke sets up the scene which illustrates one of his themes: the rejection of Jesus by his own people (and hence, particularly, the mission to the gentiles which Luke describes in Acts). Jesus' ministry begins in Galilee. His spirit-filled teaching brings fame and praise. He goes to his home town, Nazareth. In the synagogue he reads from Isaiah. Oddly, Luke inserts "*to let the oppressed go free*" from Isaiah 58.6 into 61.1-2 (in our first reading). He also has Jesus stop reading just before the words "*and the day of vengeance of our God*" – Luke understands Jesus' work as primarily one of redemption. Jesus, therefore, presents himself as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy in strongly eschatological terms – eschatology is the theology related to "end things". Rejection, as Jesus predicts, soon follows.

The Fifth Sunday after Easter

Old Testament lesson: Ezekiel 47.1-12

Ezekiel was a prophet who explained the catastrophe of the fall of Jerusalem and Babylonian exile in terms of divine punishment for disobedience. Later, he describes visions of subsequent return and restoration, physical and spiritual. Today's reading is from chapter 47, the second last. Here the prophet has a vision of the magnificently rebuilt temple, to which the Lord returns to be served by an obedient people. He describes The Life-Giving River, flowing from *below the threshold of the Temple*, which revives the Dead Sea and gives rise to all sorts of abundance. This river recalls both Eden and the Gihon spring which issued from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

New Testament lesson: John 21.1-19

This is from the epilogue to St John's gospel. It is widely considered to be a post-Johannine addition. Jesus appears to the disciples by the "*sea of Tiberias*" (Tiberias being a town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee). As with Luke's story of the encounter on the road to Emmaus, at first the disciples do not recognise him. There is a miraculous draught of fish. Peter, the fisherman, is the focus of the story. However, the "*disciple whom Jesus loved*" is the first to recognise Jesus. He is contrasted with Peter, who has denied Jesus (but is about to be rehabilitated). Casting "*the net to the right side of the boat*" signifies blessing and prosperity. The miraculous catch, as in Luke 5.1-11, is a metaphor for mission. Unlike Luke's story, here "*the net was not torn*" emphasising the importance of unity amongst the members of the Jesus movement. The abundance of fish recalls Ezekiel's vision in v.10 of our first reading. The number of fish (153) may refer to the total number of species of fish known at that time or may be a reference to the feeding of the five thousand in John 6.1-14: 12 baskets + 5 loaves = 17; 153 is the sum of all the numbers up to 17. Also, an equilateral triangle, made up of dots, with sides of 17 dots, contains 153 dots in all. Such arithmetical tricks were popular literary devices. The meal on the lake shore has Eucharistic echoes, as well as reference to feeding the multitude. Peter affirms his love for Christ 3 times, exactly mirroring his three denials. Jesus, having rehabilitated him, then predicts Peter's martyrdom.

The Fourth Sunday after Easter

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 60.1-14

Today's reading comes from Trito- or Third Isaiah. As we have seen in other weeks, these chapters appear to be from a time when, perhaps, the prophet was in Jerusalem, after the return from exile, when restoration of the city and religious life were proceeding slowly among a disillusioned and demoralised community. The focus is on the destiny of Jerusalem, looking from an unsatisfactory present to an apocalyptic vision of a purified people and a glorified Jerusalem, as capital of the religious world. This passage is an address to Zion, imagined as a woman who will gather her

scattered children. The Lord's universal sovereignty is also emphasised. "Nations" will be drawn by Zion's light. Diaspora Israelites will return by sea and Gentiles will come to serve the city, helping to rebuild the temple with materials brought with them (note the reference to 'gold and frankincense' in verse 6). Those who come, thereby acknowledging the Lord's sovereignty, will be saved. The nations who do not will perish. Verse 10 summarises much the book of Isaiah: the wrath against Jerusalem of the universally supreme God of Israel will turn to favour.

New Testament lesson: Mark 16.9-20

This reading consists of the final verses of Mark's gospel, as we have them in our Bibles. It is pretty much universally agreed that they are not original – being added very much later, probably in the C2nd. So, what are we to make of them? One approach is to say that although they cannot be attributed to the evangelist, neither can they be dismissed. They are there, in the canon, bearing the authority of centuries of use. They can be seen as a commentary, by the very early church, on Mark's and the other gospels. They repeat, in truncated form, material from what we know as the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John, in particular: Mary Magdalene in the garden; the 2 disciples on the road to Emmaus; the initial disbelief of some disciples in relation to post-resurrection appearances; the great commission to proclaim the good news to the whole world; the importance of signs; and the ascension. The truth of the resurrection is asserted, scepticism rebuked, and discipleship, evangelism, and continuing divine presence are affirmed. Very early followers of Jesus seem to have felt the need to round off Mark's gospel in some way, either to make up for an ending which had been lost or to make less enigmatic what would otherwise be its conclusion. We might draw two lessons from this. First, we see in the pages of the Bible, commentary on itself, emphasising the importance of the point that these ancient, often opaque and difficult, texts demand careful, informed reading and interpretation. Second, the Bible does not, as it were, close itself on the story. As the Rev'd Professor Christopher Tuckett put it at the end of his commentary on Mark: *'Maybe Mark's gospel is indeed unfinished. But perhaps that is deliberate. It is up to the reader to supply the ending – and that is the perennial challenge of this gospel to all its readers today.'*

The Third Sunday after Easter

Old Testament lesson: Nehemiah 7.73-8.12

The book of Nehemiah should be treated as a single book with that of Ezra (neither of whom was a prophet). Beginning where Chronicles ends, it describes the return from Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem: physically (including the Temple) and communally, as the obedient people of God. Nehemiah and Ezra represent (respectively) political and religious leadership. Today's reading follows the completion – after many difficulties - of the construction work and the return of the exiled people, including the priestly orders. Until this point, the book is written in the first person, as Nehemiah's memoir. Here, it becomes third person report. The people gather to celebrate and to be properly reconstituted as the Lord's community. There is a democratic element, in that it is the people who instruct Ezra to read the books of the Law, the Torah – he does not impose it on them. They stand in veneration. When Ezra has read to them, he and the priestly Levites interpret what has just been read; their message is that tough though the law may sound, it is ultimately a source of joy. This is a pivotal moment, inaugurating and ordering 2nd Temple Jerusalem. Ezra becomes the second founder of Judaism, after Moses. The community is reconstituted by hearing and, importantly, being helped to understand, the law, which is not to be seen as static and restrictive, but dynamic and joy-giving. The community is a community of hope.

New Testament lesson: Luke 24.33-50

This reading immediately follows the supper at Emmaus and concludes Luke's gospel. Jesus being known in the act of breaking bread was established early, as can be seen in the book of Acts and St. Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians. A real meal becomes the vehicle of deeper meaning – transfigured, one might say. This theme of the relationship between the physical and transcendent may reflect concerns which were current at the time when the gospel was being written. When Jesus appears among the disciples, at first, they think he is a ghost. But he is real. He can eat. And there are wounds to his hands and feet; this is also the man who was put to death by crucifixion (heading off any stories that someone else had been crucified in his place). Jesus then expounds the meaning of scripture and tells the disciples to go back to Jerusalem, to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and then to proclaim the gospel to all nations, starting with Jerusalem. This powerfully echoes the Old Testament themes of Nehemiah – a renewed community of joyful hope, based in Jerusalem, founded on a proper understanding of scripture. It also resonates with Isaiah's portrayal of that restored Jerusalem ultimately drawing all nations to it. There follows what seems to be a description of Jesus' ascension. But the story is not finished, Luke has depicted an open future which embraces us.

The Second Sunday after Easter

Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 7.7-13

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 in 622 BC, which were inspired by the discovery in the Temple of a 'scroll of the Torah'. However, it seems to have been edited and expanded after that, indeed, after the return from Babylonian exile. 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 occupation of the Promised Land. It has some passages to do with bloody conquest which are extremely uncomfortable for the modern reader. One such comes just before today's reading – God commands the complete destruction of the inhabitants of Canaan and their places of worship. He also forbids any intermarriage. Even if this is symbolic language, aimed at the people of the second temple period (in other words, after the return from exile), to preserve their distinctive, discrete identity, this is tough stuff. It emphasises God's passion for Israel and resulting jealousy. Today's reading spells out the blessings which accompany obedience. God gives all and demands all, visiting commensurate punishment on individuals who reject him.

New Testament lesson: Luke 16.19-31

This is the famous parable of the rich man and Lazarus (not the Lazarus of John's gospel who Jesus raises from the dead). It seems to be a reworked folk story which was popular at the time. It is part of Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees, which begins at the beginning of Ch.14, when he goes to dine at a leading Pharisee's house. It combines two recurring Lukan themes: earthly riches contrasted with poverty and the reversal of roles (as we see in the Magnificat, when Mary sings, '*he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.*') The rich man and Lazarus are both in the abode of the dead (sheol or hades), but there is a gulf between them: the rich man is in torment, Lazarus is in the bosom of Abraham. The wealth of the rich man is exemplified by his wearing, in life, clothing which was very expensively dyed purple with extracts from tens of thousands of murex shellfish. He has not understood the complete reversal of values and asks that Lazarus come to serve him by cooling his tongue. When he is told that is not possible, he asks that Lazarus be sent as a messenger to his brothers to warn them (again, acting in his service, albeit on an errand of mercy). Abraham's reply, '*If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead*' serves at least two purposes. First, it says that Hebrew scripture (our Old Testament) contains a compelling call to repentance which stands against unjust material inequality; secondly, it addresses the Pharisees at the time the gospel was written, then great rivals of the emerging Jesus movement, to say Hebrew scripture and Jesus' resurrection must be seen in relation to each other, in order for both to be properly understood.

The First Sunday after Easter

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 26.1-9, 19

This passage comes from the first part of Isaiah which, as we have seen, addresses Jerusalem in a time of uncertainty and danger (at around the time when Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC). The prophet emphasises the consequences of Jerusalem's disobedience. Chs 24-27 consist of extended descriptions of God's destructive judgement on the wicked (and is therefore called "the Isaiah apocalypse"). However, the relentless doom is lightened by psalms of praise and today's reading is an example. By contrast with earlier desolation, this is a song of trust in God's victory and faithfulness. It is similar to the entrance liturgies to be found in the Psalms, possibly a divine warrior hymn, accompanying the entry of the righteous into the Temple, perhaps bearing with them the divine presence in the form of the Ark of the Covenant. The Lectionary tacks v.19 onto the end of the reading. It is one of the very rare Old Testament references to resurrection and is much debated. We read in the synoptic gospels and Acts of the disputes between the Pharisees and Sadducees about life after death. Some argue that this passage is unequivocal in affirming it. Others, argue that, seen in context, it is more an expression of confidence in national restoration.

New Testament lesson: Luke 24.1-12

The first 12 verses of Ch.24 are Luke's account of the discovery of the empty tomb. It seems to draw on Mark's version, though there are differences. Typically for Luke, women are portrayed as faithful, resolute witnesses, unlike the male disciples who disbelieve them. Even Peter feels that he has to go to the tomb to check; though v.12, which describes him doing so, shows signs of being a late insertion into the text, having been borrowed from John's account [20.3-10]. Particularly distinctive is Luke's emphasis on the words spoken by the dazzlingly clothed angels. Their question, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead?' recalls Jesus' answer to the Sadducees' trick question about resurrection in 20.27-40. The angels' reminder to the women of what Jesus had forecast, while still in Galilee, about the circumstances of his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection is more significant than the simple fact of the empty tomb. This is not so much an announcement of the resurrection as the reminder of a promise. It is to Jesus' words that they point. The resurrection is proclaimed as part of the wider phenomenon of Jesus' teaching and the divine necessity of his death. It is to this totality that the community of Jesus followers in Jerusalem must look for the foundation of what would become the Christian church.

Easter Day



The Supper at Emmaus [1601]. Caravaggio [1571-1610]

This evening's readings take us beyond this morning's excitement at the discovery of the empty tomb. The Old Testament lesson concerns another dimension of resurrection.

Old Testament lesson: Ezekiel 37.1-14

Ezekiel was a member of a priestly family and one of 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, the return of the people and the rebuilding of the temple is anticipated. Today's reading, the famous story of the Valley of Dry Bones, exemplifies that theme. The prophet has a vision of bones: dead and without hope of life. These are the people of Israel, exiled from a destroyed Jerusalem, spiritually dead and without hope. They are given life, raised up, and restored by God. "Breath" and "wind" are metaphors for the life-giving spirit, recalling that which "*moved upon the face of the waters*" in the first creation story [Genesis 1.2] and animated Adam in the second [Genesis 2.7]. This spirit not only gives life, it makes possible faithfulness to God. The reading ends, '*Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord*'. By this God asserts his own prestige and credibility, his glory, acting for the sake of his name. Something we acknowledge when we say the Lord's Prayer: '*Hallowed be thy name*' and '*Thine be the kingdom, the power, and the glory*'. The prophecy concerns the deliverance of the people from exile in Babylon. A Christian reading is that this passage anticipates Jesus and the Gospel hope of general, bodily resurrection.

New Testament lesson: Luke 24.13-35

On the very day of the discovery of the empty tomb, two (previously unnamed) disciples encounter the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. Jesus explains, in terms of Hebrew Scripture, his life and the necessity of his own death, but still the disciples do not recognise him. Recognition and understanding only come with the sharing of bread – recalling the feeding of the 5000 and, especially, the Last Supper. The breaking of bread, as a feature of the collective life of early Christians, is something stressed by Luke in Acts [see Acts 2:42] and it may be that, in this story, Luke is saying something which is universal, applying to every age and which is about not properly seeing the Christian truth in front of us.

Caravaggio captured this idea in his masterpiece, the *Supper at Emmaus*, which is in the National Gallery. In that great painting, we are part of the drama. There is a place for us at the table. We want to push the basket of fruit back, to stop it falling off. The disciple's outstretched

hand draws us in. A flood of light enables Christ to be recognised – light which can be seen and by which truth is seen. The beardless Christ is not the Christ of the crucifixion but someone mysteriously youthful. By contrast, the innkeeper is in shadow and uncomprehending. But he is real. As the fruit, the bread, and the fowl are real. As are the chair and the disciple's torn clothing. The eternal creative rationality we call God, the cosmic principle of order, beauty, truth, and love, is the light of the world and the darkness has not overcome it. The divine is encountered in the quotidian, this everyday world of time and space.

Palm Sunday

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 thing

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 beneath my feet.

G.K. Chesterton

A bit corny and sentimental, but a strangely powerful expression of the potential worth of the ill-favoured.

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 5.1-7

The first part of Isaiah addresses Jerusalem in a time of increased uncertainty and danger, when Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC. The Lord's people have condemned themselves by their rebellion against him and, as result, Judah (the southern kingdom) and Jerusalem will fall. It appears to be a love song using the metaphor of a vineyard (something seen elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially in the Song of Songs). However, the imagery is multi-layered. There is the idea of God as the creator of an abundant garden for his people (rather like Eden in the second creation story). Added to that is the imagery of a law court. There is accusation, verdict, and sentence. The 'vineyard' (standing for Israel) is established and protected at great trouble by its owner. The disobedience of the people to whom it is granted causes it to be utterly unproductive. Judgement follows. The verdict is guilty. The punishment is destruction and complete desolation. The reading ends with the reason for the guilty verdict, making this (unusually for prophetic writing) a sort of parable.

New Testament lesson: Mark 12.1-12

Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by a sequence in which he challenges the authority of those whose status derives from the Temple cult and, in turn, is challenged by them about his authority. Today's reading is the parable of the wicked tenants and is told for this purpose. It builds on the image, familiar from the Old Testament, of the vineyard as standing for God's generosity to Israel. Indeed, the description here of the vineyard quotes Isaiah 5, as C 1st Jews would know well. However, there is an important difference. In Isaiah, the vineyard is unproductive because of its custodians' disobedience and is laid waste by God. In the New Testament, the vineyard is abundant. Messengers from its owner, including his own son, are mistreated and killed because its tenants want to keep everything, including the vineyard, for themselves and not give up what is due. The punishment which follows is not destruction of the vineyard (as in Isaiah) but the destruction of the tenants. The vineyard will then be leased to others. The meaning is obvious: the vineyard is Israel; the wicked tenants are the religious establishment; the fruit is what is due to God; the messengers are the prophets; the slain son is Jesus; the new tenants are the Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus. If, as many commentators hold, Mark's gospel was written just after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD, this reading may serve a dual purpose. It illustrates Jesus' own response to the question of his authority, set against that of the chief priests, scribes, and elders. But the gospel's first readers might also see the destruction of the wicked tenants as representing the destruction of the Temple cult. This could reinforce the claims of the new Jesus movement, as against the Pharisees' reformed Judaism, based on rabbinic teaching in synagogues. This parable also appears in Matthew 21:33-46 and Luke 20:9-19.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Old Testament lesson: Exodus 7:8-24

On the last two Sundays, we have followed some of the Exodus account of the unsuccessful attempts by Moses and his older brother Aaron to secure freedom for the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Today's reading takes us to the first of the 10 plagues which will culminate in the liberation which came to be commemorated by the Passover festival. Cosmic conflict is played out in the world as the Lord's limitless sovereignty overwhelms such powers as Pharaoh has at his command. Aaron's staff becomes a snake. Pharaoh's magicians seem to repeat this feat, but their snakes are promptly eaten by Aaron's. The scene then shifts to the Nile and all the waters of Egypt. They are turned to blood, a catastrophe for Egypt whose way of life entirely depends upon these waters. To get a sense of the enormity of what is being said here, we need to look at the oracle against Egypt in chapters 29-32 of Ezekiel. The Nile is understood as God's gracious gift to Egypt, granting life and prosperity. The oracle begins: *I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon sprawling in the midst of its channels, saying, 'My Nile is my own; I made it for myself.'* [Ezekiel 29:3] Pharaoh has, by this, converted what has been created and given by God into Royal property, made by himself. Pharaoh becomes an aquatic monster (a familiar Old Testament image of destructive chaos). His disobedience disrupts the goodness of creation. The Nile is transformed from the epitome of orderly, life-enhancing abundance into a river of death.

New Testament lesson: Luke 22:1-13

Luke emphatically sets earthly events in the context of the cosmic war between good and evil. Immediately before today's reading, the evangelist has described the culmination of Jesus' public teaching as a vivid, urgent forecast of an apocalyptic judgement of the world, for which the believer must be constantly prepared. That Jesus' last days on earth have the context of the Passover resonates powerfully with the recollection of what proved to be the unequal clash between God and such powers as Pharaoh could call upon, folding an understanding of Israel's history into experience of the present, affirming and reinterpreting both.

That Luke feels the need to explain the Passover is an indication that he was writing for a Gentile readership. Notice that Judas, who after all had been recruited by Jesus, is corrupted

by Satan (though this does not absolve him of guilt). Just as, according to Deuteronomy 16:5-8, the Israelites were told by the Lord where to celebrate the Passover, Jesus gives instructions for the location of the Passover meal, which was to be the Last Supper. This seems to have involved some advanced planning. The same Greek word is used for the upstairs room as that which is translated as 'inn' in Luke's account of the nativity.

There is a tiny Syriac Orthodox church, St Mark's, in Jerusalem which is built above a room which is said to be the place. Whether or not that is right, it is a moving experience to listen there, as we have, to an ancient Syriac nun singing the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic – the language spoken by Jesus.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Old Testament lesson: Exodus 6.2-13

Last week, in relation to Exodus, we considered how it seems reasonable to think, even if there has been much legendary embellishment, there is likely to be some actuality lying at the root of a long oral tradition which was then expressed in writing. Whether one takes a predominantly historical or metaphorical view of Exodus, it can be read as a sort of narrative theology, demonstrating the nature of God and His relationship with Israel. By this, the book is foundational to Israel's self-understanding, how its people became a nation through the action of their God, to whom they were bound by divinely instigated covenant. We see that developed in today's reading. God's self-disclosure, which as not been fully realised by His appearances to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, unfolds through His actions in history. God's promises are repeated and elaborated. Moses's obedience has, at first met, with disaster – his request to go to worship in Sinai caused Egyptian oppression to increase with Pharaoh's orders that brick production by the Israelites must be maintained, even though they must get for themselves the necessary straw. As a result, Moses senses that the combination of his own inadequacy as a communicator and the people's demoralisation mean that he will persuade neither the Israelites nor Pharaoh. However, God gives implacable orders, reassuring Moses of the permanence of the covenant relationship, which will deliver and redeem God's people in the face of socio-political or cosmic oppression. Furthermore, the authority of the descendants of Moses and Aaron is established; they were Kohathite Levites from which the hereditary Jerusalem priesthood drew its prestige and position.

New Testament lesson: John 12.1-8

This story is set at a dinner in Bethany, after the raising of Lazarus and before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The raising of Lazarus is, by John's account, the event which precipitates the crucifixion – it causes the Jerusalem council to plan to have Jesus put to death. The high priest, Caiaphas, is reported by John (with typically Johannine irony) to have said, 'It is better for you to have one man die for the people, than to have the whole nation destroyed.' [11:50]. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair. This is an example of the importance of women in John's gospel and their presentation as models of faith and discipleship. There are others: Jesus' unnamed mother at the wedding at Cana and, with 3 other women, at the foot of the cross; the Samaritan woman at the well; Martha, Mary's sister; and Mary Magdalene's discovery of the empty tomb and encounter with the risen Lord, mistaking him for a gardener. This has caused some scholars to raise the intriguing possibility that the Fourth Evangelist, who we call 'John', may have been a woman. The extravagance of Mary's action reflects Jesus' forthcoming self-sacrifice. That her hair was loose, is a sign of extreme grief, as she anoints his feet as a dead body might be anointed. This anointing also anticipates Jesus' washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper [13:12]; this exemplifies the duty of humble service but notably it is a woman who is the first to recognise this duty and who performs it unasked. The nard's fragrance contrasts with the stench when Mary's brother was raised a few days earlier. All of this contrasts with Judas' mean dishonesty. Jesus' rebuke to Judas (*You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me* [12:8]) is not an indication of ethical unconcern but a sign of the urgency caused by the imminence of his death. This episode

may result from the Fourth Evangelist's knowledge of the synoptic gospels. He (or, possibly, she) may have reworked the stories in Matthew [26:6-13] and Mark [14:3-11] (set in the home of Simon the leper, 2 days before the Passover) and Luke [7:36-50] (a 'sinner', traditionally identified as Mary Magdalene, anoints Jesus' feet) and Luke's story of the house-proud Martha and attentive Mary [10:38-42].

The Third Sunday in Lent

Old Testament lesson: Exodus 5.1-6.1

Exodus gives an account of the delivery of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and the beginning of their desert wanderings before entering the promised land. What are we to make of these ancient stories, which were once thought to be about events roughly 1300 years before Christ? The extent to which, if at all, they depict things which really happened is irrecoverable. For example, archaeological evidence fails to support the idea that Canaan was occupied by a nation which came from outside its borders and the Passover was not established as a national festival until the 7th BC. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to think, even if there has been much legendary embellishment, there is likely to be some actuality lying at the root of a long oral tradition which was then expressed in writing. Whether one takes a predominantly historical or metaphorical view, it can be read as a sort of narrative theology, demonstrating the nature of God and His relationship with Israel. It is also a paradigm of something repeated through history: confrontation with tyrannical worldly power and deliverance with the help of God, escaping subjection by the former by accepting the authority of the latter.

In today's reading, Moses and Aaron petition Pharaoh for permission to make a pilgrimage to the sacred mountain. Pharaoh is dismissive – he says that he has not even heard of the LORD. Acknowledgement of the LORD and His power is one of the central themes of Exodus. The point being made is that Pharaoh should know Him and acknowledge His power. Pharaoh's oppression of the people intensifies (they are obliged to maintain the production of bricks but without being provided with straw). The people turn on Moses and Aaron. Stung by this, Moses, in turn, complains to the LORD, who responds with reassurance of His power and a promise of deliverance.

New Testament lesson: Matthew 10.16-22

This reading comes from a collection of instructions concerned with mission. Jesus has called the 12 disciples and is sending them out to heal, exorcise, and "*proclaim the good news*" exclusively to Jews (the other synoptic gospels do not say that the mission initially excluded gentiles). Matthew is generally concerned to fit Jesus' ministry into Old Testament prophecy and this exclusive mission is consistent with the idea of the prophesied Messiah being sent to Israel. In today's short reading, Jesus warns the disciples of the hostility they will have to endure. Interestingly, Matthew refers to "*their synagogues*". This may be because, by the time this gospel was written, the separation of the Jesus movement from Judaism had begun. The twelve stand, here, for Christians of later times, heralding the coming of the Son of Man. The sufferings predicted for them have a strongly eschatological (end time) character and also reflect what will happen to Jesus later in the gospel narrative in that they mirror His passion sufferings: betrayal by someone close, being delivered into the hands of hostile worldly authority, then being beaten and killed.

The Second Sunday in Lent

Old Testament lesson: Genesis 12.1-9

This reading marks a major development in the story of Genesis. God commands Abram to move, lock, stock, and barrel, to another land, with the promise that obedience will be followed by the founding of a great nation: implying numerous progeny (despite Sarai's barrenness), prosperity, political independence, and blessing which will ultimately extend to all peoples. This passage was the subject of a treatise, called *On the Migration of Abraham*, by Philo, a

Jewish Alexandrian philosopher who lived from about 25 BC to about 50 AD. I am going to quote from it to show something important about how to read scripture in that it was interpreted allegorically from the earliest times. By this, it may be seen that treating scripture seriously, but not necessarily literally, is not a purely modern phenomenon. Philo's commentary is hard to follow at first hearing but it merits persistence and the text is posted in the usual places for repeated reading.

So, this is from Philo's *On the Migration of Abraham*.

God begins the carrying out of his will to cleanse man's soul by giving it a starting point for full salvation in its removal out of three localities, namely, body, sense-perception and speech. 'Land' or 'country' is a symbol of body, 'kindred' of sense-perception, 'father's house' of speech. How so? Because the body took its substance out of earth (or land) and is again resolved into earth. Moses is a witness to this, when he says, "Earth thou art and unto earth shalt thou return [Genesis 3.19]; indeed, he also says that the body was clay formed into human shape by God's moulding hand, and what suffers solution must needs be resolved into the elements which were united to form it. Sense-perception, again, is one of kin and family with understanding, the irrational with the rational, for both these are parts of one soul. And speech is our 'father's house', 'father's because mind is our father, sowing in each of the parts of the body the faculties that issue from itself, and assigning to them their workings, being in control and charge of them all; 'house' – because mind has speech for its house or living room, secluded from the rest of the homestead. It is mind's living place, just as the hearthside is man's. It is there that mind displays, in an orderly form, itself and all the conceptions to which it gives birth, treating it as a man treats his house.

New Testament lesson: John 8.51-59

This comes from an extended passage in John's gospel in which Jesus is teaching in the temple and confronts those described as 'the Jews who had believed in him' [8.31] or just 'the Jews' [8.48]. The reading set for today comes just after one of the most controversial texts in the Bible, which one senses the Lectionary would prefer to avoid. Jesus is depicted as saying to the Jews that they are the children of the devil, a murderer and the father of lies and, as result, are unable to accept Jesus' word. This text has for centuries been used to fuel Christian anti-Semitism; indeed, it was used by the Nazis for that purpose. It stands as a sobering lesson in how scripture can be misused, particularly if taken literally, superficially, and out of context. As today's reading picks up the story, Jesus counters his questioners by saying that he is from and reveals the eternal reality, beyond space and time. By him, the Father's glory is made manifest. Transcendent timelessness is emphasised by having Jesus say that those who accept his teaching cannot spiritually die, that Abraham had seen Jesus' day and was glad, and – in a revealing confusion of tenses - before Abraham was (past tense), Jesus is (present tense). Associating himself with God is considered blasphemous and there is a move to stone him. But Jesus almost ethereally fades away, as John records him doing on other occasions [7.30, 32, 45].

The First Sunday in Lent

Old Testament lesson: Genesis 2.15-7, 3.1-7

The Bible's first creation story, which begins, '*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth*', is sonorous, stately, ordered, repetitive, and liturgical; culminating in God, majestic and ineffable, resting in and ruling from the temple of his creation. It is generally ascribed to what is called a priestly source. Today's reading comes from the second, very different, account of creation, from another source, usually called Yahwistic. It is the story of Adam and Eve and is the first chapter of a theological epic, witnessing to, and interpreting, the acts of God in relation to humankind. Unlike the priestly depiction, its style is lively and direct, one might say, earthy. God entrusts the garden of Eden to Adam before the creation of Eve. Eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (standing, essentially, for wisdom) is prohibited. Snakes were, in the ancient world, symbols of wisdom, fertility, and immortality.

The idea of *'original sin'*, which is then inherited by all subsequent generations, is not really to be found in the text; that is a much later idea developed, especially, in the letters of Paul and the writings of St. Augustine and Martin Luther. It should be noticed that the text is explicit that the serpent was created by God and placed in the garden. By this, the capacity for evil is embedded by God in creation. This is the story of the development of civilised life involving damage to the relationships between God, humankind, and creation. Human autonomy has involved a hubristic ambition to have God-like wisdom – substituting human judgement for that of God. The consequence is alienation, hardship, and unhappiness. But note that a little later in the story, expulsion from the garden is not punishment as such, it is to stop Adam and Eve eating from the fruit of the other tree, the Tree of Life, so achieving immortality, in addition to wisdom, therefore rivalling God.

New Testament lesson: Luke 13:31-5

This short reading exemplifies the genius of the gospel writers. Its handful of lines are packed with reference and nuanced meaning. Pharisees are usually depicted negatively. Here, however, some of them warn Jesus that Herod is after him. But is it as straightforward as them being fair-minded, or even supportive? Jesus' response shows that he knows that they will be reporting back to Herod. He does move on, but not because of their warning; he does so in fulfilment of God's purposes: his earthly ministry must culminate in Jerusalem. Calling Herod a 'fox', is to evoke proverbial cunning, weakness, and cruelty. By referring to Jerusalem, Jesus associates himself with the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, and their rejection by the very people they strove to save. 'Jerusalem' stands for those people and Jesus, rather than denouncing them, expresses an anguished, maternal care and yearning. This echoes Isaiah's 'motherhood' imagery and Hebrew Bible depictions of Wisdom as personified and feminine. Jesus expresses concern for the welfare of the city but knows that he will be rejected. The last words of the reading quote Psalm 118.26; a psalm of thanksgiving for victory in battle, and a verse which immediately follows reference to the stone the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone and the foundation of salvation.

Quinquagesima or the next Sunday before Lent



Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 19.1-16

The kingdom of David and Solomon has been divided into Israel (north) and Judah (south). Ahab, King of Israel, has married the Phoenician, Jezebel who brings with her the worship of Baal. After Elijah has massacred the prophets of Baal, Ahab runs away and tells Jezebel. She is made of sterner stuff and threatens Elijah with revenge. Elijah flees as far as he can to southern Judah, where he suffers an existential crisis. With the help of an angel, he travels for 40 days and nights to Mount Horeb (another name for Sinai), even further away from Jezebel, where he encounters YHWH. Horeb is the mountain where Moses heard God from the burning bush [Exodus Ch.3], struck the rock from which water then flowed [Exodus 17.1-7], and received the ten commandments and the interminable instructions for cultic ritual worship. Elijah expresses his despair and loneliness and is reassured by the voice of YHWH which comes not from theophanies (divine manifestations) of violent storm, earthquake, or fire but a gentle whisper. A new order is to succeed the old which will overthrow the worship of Baal – not by violent demonstrations of divine power but through the quiet stealth of political change. Here we see how the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, repeatedly folds back on itself – the 40 days and nights it takes Elijah to get to Horeb echoes the 40 years of wilderness wandering and Horeb has been the scene of a number of important manifestations of God.

New Testament lesson: Mark 9.2-13

The New Testament lesson is a striking illustration of how the New Testament also repeatedly folds back onto the Old; an appreciation of which helps us to understand many of the controversies which run through the New Testament, as the Jesus movement establishes itself as the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham and the laws given to Moses but which takes those promises and laws, and the understanding of God's purposes, in a radically new direction. This is the story of the transfiguration. Mark seems to be making the point that Jesus stands in continuity with Moses (perhaps representing scripture) and Elijah (perhaps seen as the forerunner of the Messiah). As with Moses, the scene is set on a mountain. Jesus is transfigured, as Moses' face was seen to shine as he came down with the tablets of the covenant [Exodus 34.29-30]. The story seems to anticipate Jesus' future glory. But it is a glory which breaks into the reality of time and space. I have posted the image of an icon written for me by Aidan Hart and which hangs above my desk. Notice that Jesus' feet are outside the circle of eternity and are firmly on the ground. When Peter seems to imply that Jesus is on a par with Moses and Elijah, he is rebuked by the divine voice revealing Jesus' true nature and authority (as at his baptism). Jesus then tells the disciples that the scribes have missed that Elijah (anticipated as a Messianic forerunner) has already come in John the Baptist - he was not recognised and was killed, as will happen to Jesus.

Sexagesima or the Second Sunday before Lent

Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 8:1-11

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 (which presents an obvious challenge for Christians, committed to a gospel of love – notes about this can be seen via the Glaphorn Church website homepage, for readings on 21st April last year). In today's reading, Moses warns the people against the risk of complacency when they settle into the ease and plenty of the promised land. He reminds them of how the Lord cared for them during the hardships of their 40 years in the wilderness and exhorts them to maintain a disciplined obedience to God's commands, undistracted by comfort and abundance.

New Testament lesson: Matthew 6:25-34

This contains a message which is a mirror image of the Old Testament lesson. Amidst the

almost impossible demands of discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages his listeners not to worry and to trust in God's abundant provision for them. The Sermon on the Mount is a wonderful illustration of the subtlety and sophistication of the gospel's author. It is separated from Jesus' temptation in the wilderness only by the call of disciples and a short summary of his Galilean ministry. Jesus' 40 days and nights in the wilderness echo Israel's 40 years wandering before entering the promised land. That Jesus goes up a mountain echoes the association between Moses and a mountain in relation to God's commandments (though, interestingly, Luke's setting for something similar but shorter is 'a level place' [Luke 6:17]). The Sermon on the Mount is often characterised as a comprehensive account of 'Christian principles', but it is not. It might better be seen as the first of 5 collections of sayings, which the evangelist carefully assembled and then arranged thematically: the Sermon on the Mount [Chs 5-7]; instructions to the disciples [Ch. 10]; parables of the kingdom [Ch. 13]; directions for life in the Church [Ch. 18]; and sayings concerned with the end-time or eschaton [Chs 22-25]. Some have seen significance in the number 5, calling this the Matthean Pentateuch. Each of these compilations should be read in the context of the others and in the context of the overarching theme of God's grace and the relationship between Jesus and God the Father.

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Jeremiah is the longest book in the bible and one of the most difficult. Its subject is the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in the 6th BC. The historical background is a complex story of shifting and divided alliances with Babylonians and Egyptians, with the predictable betrayals. Exactly how the book was created, the weaving together of narrative, poetry, myth, metaphor, and prophetic exhortation is irrecoverable. However, it is generally agreed that at its core there is the work of a real prophet, who lived through these terrible times and was to die in Egypt, where he had fled after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The audience for the book in its final, repeatedly edited form, was probably the exiled community. There are many diversions and inconsistencies but there are themes which have to do with the covenant relationship between the people and God, the breaking of that relationship, but the possibility of renewal through repentance. And all this within the context of the question asked by people down the ages: why has this happened to us? Is it that God could not prevent it? Or, is it that he could but chose not to? And, if that, why?

Today's reading is part of the prophet's call and commission. It is quite stylised and not unlike the call of Moses in Exodus and Deuteronomy (in which the words of ch.18 v.18 are almost identical to v.9 in our reading). Strikingly, Jeremiah's prophetic mission is presented as being to include the nations which have destroyed Judah; by this, they too are subject to divine governance. The last words of the reading anticipate restoration.

New Testament lesson: Mark 1:40-45

Mark's gospel sets off at a spanking pace, launching straight into the gospel narrative. There is no nativity story, no angels, magi, or shepherds, no foretelling of the births of the Baptist or Jesus. In the first chapter, Jesus, after his baptism, starts his ministry – recruiting apostles, teaching in synagogues and elsewhere, and performing miracles, demonstrating his authority in relation to matters of belief and his authority over diseases and demons. In today's reading, still in ch.1, he heals a man suffering from skin lesions (what was called leprosy could have been a number of ailments). Healing is expressed in terms of cleansing. By touching the man, Jesus made himself unclean by the standards of Jewish purity laws – he was breaking boundaries. However, Jesus commands the man to see the priest, in compliance with the law in Leviticus ch.14, in order to be readmitted to society. Because what should have remained secret is made widely known, Jesus is (at least for time) unable openly to visit a town. Thus, the leper's readmission to society leads (temporarily) to a degree of social constraint for Jesus. It is worth noting that the cleansed leper spread the 'word', in Greek *τον λογον*, an expression freighted with meaning, standing for missional truth.

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Old Testament Lesson: Jonah 3.1-10

The book of Jonah is unique among the prophets. It is intended to be funny. It does not contain the usual oracles against Israel (for its disobedience) nor the surrounding nations. Jonah is not called a prophet in the text. He is not portrayed as an obedient servant of the Lord, calling people to repentance, but as a recalcitrant prophet who tries to get out of doing as God asks and then sulks when his hearers repent. Today's reading comes after the famous story of Jonah being swallowed by an enormous fish and being "spewed ... out on dry land" when he repents of his earlier disobedience. God gives him another chance and calls him, again, to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was an important city in Assyria (the north of modern Iraq). The pagan people respond to Jonah's preaching and acknowledge the power of his God. Their repentance causes God to change his mind about their destruction. The points made are to do with repentance and resulting deliverance available beyond the confines of narrow nationalism.

New Testament lesson: John 3.14-21

The context is the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus (a Pharisee and Jewish religious leader, apparently a member of the Sanhedrin). Nicodemus, symbolically, comes at night, out of darkness into the light of Jesus. The fourth evangelist, John, puts dialogue between Jesus and the Jewish religious establishment near the beginning of his gospel, rather than towards the end, as we find in the synoptic gospels. There is a similar difference in chronology in relation to the cleansing of the temple. There is another difference – Nicodemus is sympathetic, if uncomprehending. Theologically, this is an exceptionally complex passage of scripture and this short introduction can do little more than identify some signposts.

Before today's reading, there has been a discussion about unbelief and rebirth. The presence of Nicodemus then mysteriously dissolves and there is an abrupt change from the first to the third person. It is far from clear whether what follows is being presented as the words of Jesus or the reflections of a narrator. Anticipating the crucifixion, an event from Numbers 21:8-9 is deployed as an analogy. It is when Moses delivered Israel from a plague of venomous snakes by raising a bronze snake on a pole. The crucifixion is anticipated as a raising up; a saving event of exaltation and glorification, granting to believers eternal life.

Jesus is said to come from God and salvation is expressed in terms of seeing and believing that to be so. God's gift of His son is motivated by infinite love; necessarily so great because of the depth of the world's alienation. The overarching theme of a cosmic trial (in which the world seems to be judging Jesus but is, in reality, being judged by him) can be seen in the language of judgement and condemnation. Judgement is not an event at the end of time but in the present. It depends on humankind's response to Jesus and this turns on the image of light: the light which can itself be seen; the light by which people can see; and the light by which their deeds can be seen. This idea of the cosmic trial in John's gospel is supported by the account that Nicodemus later [John 7:51] tells the Pharisees that Jesus should not be judged without fair hearing.

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 42.1-9

This passage comes in Deutero or Second Isaiah, in which the prophet addresses the people who are exiled in Babylon and much concerned with hopes of liberation, restoration, and salvation. It is the first of the poems called *The Servant Songs*. The identity of the 'servant' is much debated. It may refer to an idealised king as a metaphor for Israel. It may refer to Cyrus (to whom Babylon surrendered in 539 and who, by Jewish tradition allowed a mass return to Jerusalem from exile and gave permission for the restoration of the Temple). For Christians, this poetry anticipates Jesus and his saving agency in relation to Israel and all the nations. The

first two verses (taken together with Ps 2:7) are, more or less, quoted in the account of the voice from heaven at the baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:7-17

People from all over Judea have been flocking to be baptised by John the Baptist in the River Jordan – the river crossed by the children of Israel to take possession of the promised land. Members of two prominent groups – Pharisees and Sadducees – who come to John are rewarded with the lash of his tongue. He tells them that they cannot depend for salvation on genetic inheritance, as heirs of Abraham or, even, his baptism of repentance. Whether they have changed sufficiently to be spared will be known only by the fruit they bear. This is a stinging rebuke to complacency and reliance on mechanistic ritual observance. The Baptist's subordinate role in relation to Jesus is emphasised both by his own utterance and his exchange with Jesus concerned with the obvious question that arises: what need does Jesus have of John's baptism when he has nothing to repent? Jesus' answer seems to concern the fulfilment of prophecy, an interpretation supported by the appearance of the Spirit of God and the voice from heaven which closely echoes Isaiah 42:1, in combination with Ps 2:7. The dove as an image of the Spirit of God reflects that of the dove heralding new creation after the flood. It may also refer back to the *wind of God* [sweeping] *over the face of the waters* in the first creation story in Genesis 1.2. The orthodox view is that here the nature of Jesus, and his relationship with the Father, is manifested not changed.

The First Sunday after the Epiphany and the Baptism of Christ

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 1:1-5

This is start of the first of two contrasting creation stories in Genesis. It is generally thought to have a 'Priestly' source (from the time of the Babylonian exile, from 587 to 538 BC). What follows (the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2.4-25), is thought to have a much older 'Yahwistic' source (written in the southern kingdom of Judah in the C10th BC, the time of David/Solomon). There are echoes of Babylonian creation myths. For example, in *Enuma Elish*, order is made out of chaos (represented by "*the waters*"). However, unlike the Babylonian myths, this account is monotheistic. Creation (by a single, all powerful God) it seems to involve value or moral purpose: each element is seen by God to be "*good*". That God speaks the created order into being, and that the first element is light, finds explicit reference and development in the opening verses of John's Gospel: *In the beginning was the Word and What came into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

New Testament Lesson: John 1:29-34

This description of the baptism of Christ is rich with Old Testament reference. John the Baptist has made clear that he is not the Messiah or Elijah, and has emphasised his unworthiness compared with Jesus. Seeing Jesus, he identifies him as the Lamb of God – imagery derived from the Servant Songs in Isaiah and the Passover lamb in Exodus. Jesus' baptism by John is implied rather than described. The use of the dove as an image of the Spirit of God reflects that of the dove heralding new creation after the flood in Genesis. It may also refer back to a *wind* [or, in some translations, *spirit*] *of God* [sweeping] *over the face of the waters* in Genesis 1.2. This descent of the spirit has led to heated controversy as to whether Jesus' nature was changed by his baptism. The orthodox answer is an emphatic 'no', that this was revelation not transformation.

The Sunday after Christmas and St John the Evangelist's Day

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 63:7-9

By widely accepted understanding, the first and second parts of the book of Isaiah, respectively, address Jerusalem when threatened from the north and then the people exiled in Babylon. Trito- or Third Isaiah seems to be from a still later period – perhaps in Jerusalem, after the return from exile, when restoration of the city and religious life was proceeding slowly among a

disillusioned and demoralised community. This focuses on the destiny of Jerusalem, looking from an unsatisfactory present to a vision of a purified people and a glorified Jerusalem as capital of the religious world. Today's reading is from a communal lament (of the kind to be found in Psalms 44 and 74) but it is a section which affirms the hope of deliverance with God's help. It does so by recalling Israel's escape from Egyptian bondage by the agency of God's actual presence, exercising his love and pity, rather than that of a 'messenger or angel'.

New Testament Lesson: Ephesians 3:5-12

In the reading from Ephesians, we find another expression of confidence in God's saving purposes but, here, extending beyond Israel to the whole of humankind. What is conventionally called 'The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians' is widely thought not to have been written by Paul and, indeed, not to have been a letter. It does not have the 'occasional' characteristics of, for example, 1 and 2 Corinthians, in that the earliest versions did not refer to a particular church, people, problem, or situation and it lacks the usual Pauline 'greetings'. It is thought to have the appearance of a circular, written by someone close to Paul's thinking, after his death. This does not mean it is not authoritative. Writing in another's name (the jargon word is 'pseudepigraphy') would, at the time, be understood as a perfectly acceptable way of representing and developing a valued tradition. The distinguished New Testament scholar Professor James Dunn put it this way, Ephesians 'expresses, we may say, the transition from Paul to Pauline.' The reading starts with a summary of Paul's preoccupation that Christ had revealed what had previously been hidden: that Gentiles may be heirs to the promises made by God to Abraham and that Paul had been called by grace to make this known. This is said to be integral to God's purposes in creation and the church (modelled on Christ) is identified as the means of making it known, even to every power that can be envisaged or feared.

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 7:10-16

Much of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah concerns the time before the 7th BC Babylonian exile, when Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, was threatened by the rise of Assyria. There are repeated oracles anticipating YHWH's judgement upon the city, resulting from the disobedience of its people, which are nonetheless balanced by promises of subsequent restoration and renewal. Today's reading has the specific context of a direct threat to Jerusalem from the northern kingdoms of Israel and Aram (it has been speculated that this was because Ahaz, the king of Judah, was minded to support the Assyrians in their war against the north). We may get a tantalising glimpse of the actual person of Isaiah, who lived in Jerusalem from the latter part of the 8th BC into the first years of the 7th. He seems to have been well-connected, having ready access to the king. Just before this passage (which is unusually in the third, not the first, person), he has told Ahaz that he must stand firm in faith, or he will not stand at all. Ahaz declines God's suggestion that he ask for a sign of reassurance, on the basis that he is unwilling to put the Lord to the test. Isaiah then tells him that he is going to get a sign anyway, in the form of a child, born to an already pregnant young woman, who will be called Emmanuel (meaning, 'God with us' or 'may God be with us'). The text itself does not imply that the woman was a virgin nor does it imply that the child will be instrumental in delivering Jerusalem. However, this passage has been given a second meaning by rich, long-standing Christian tradition, which might have been triggered by pre-Christian Jewish scholars translating the Hebrew word *almah* (which does not mean virgin) into the Greek *parthenos* (which does). By this tradition, to which due respect should be paid, this passage has a layer of meaning, deeper than the literal, which foretells the birth, to a virgin, of a Saviour.

New Testament Lesson: Romans 1:1-7

I have mentioned before the trepidation with which I approach Paul's letter to the Romans and the inadequacy of these short introductions in relation to something so complex, which has been the subject of libraries of controversy. And I repeat my suggestion that there are many excellent commentaries and online resources which can help. Attempting to summarise is to step into a minefield of controversy. But, here goes. Paul, the trained Pharisee, could 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. 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? His solution was that Gentiles could, by grace and faith, become the heirs of Abraham and be judged equally with Jews at the end time. Today's short reading is the salutation which opens the letter. It is packed. First, Paul establishes his authority; unlike other apostles he never knew Jesus in life and, by saying he has been 'set apart' by being 'called', he doubtless refers to his account of a direct encounter with the risen Christ in his Damascene experience. He then explicitly sets his Christian mission in the context of Hebrew scripture (our Old Testament), which by grace and faith extends to, and includes, Gentiles; and he adds the distinctively Christian element of Christ's resurrection. The typically Pauline greeting, 'grace' and 'peace', combines Greek (therefore gentile) and Jewish ideas, emphasising the gospel's universal reach.

The Third Sunday in Advent

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah Ch.12

Today's reading is from the first part of Isaiah in which the prophet addresses Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom of Judah, around the time of the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel. His message is that God's people have condemned themselves by their disobedience and, as result, Jerusalem will be taken. In Ch.11, the prophet has told of a spirit-filled, Davidic ruler ('a shoot come out from the stump of Jesse' [11:1]) who will establish justice, peace, prosperity, and the knowledge of God and that this ruler 'will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.' [11:12] Christian tradition holds this to be a messianic prophecy. Ch.12 consists of one or two short hymns, using psalm-like language, of praise, thanksgiving, and trust in God. The similarity between the Hebrew word used for 'salvation' [v.2] and that for 'Isaiah' implies Isaiah's authority.

New Testament Lesson: Luke 1:57-66

Luke describes the birth of John the Baptist, immediately after his account of Mary singing the *Magnificat*, when she and John's mother, Elizabeth, have shared their wonder at their seemingly miraculous pregnancies. Unlike the secrecy of Luke's version of the Nativity, the Baptist's birth is a very public affair. It is a source of widespread interest among family and friends, who disapprove of the name 'John' (insisted on by Elizabeth, on Gabriel's instruction) on the basis that it is not a family name. They appeal to the baby's father, Zechariah, who has been dumb since he doubted what the angel Gabriel foretold about the birth of the child. As soon as Zechariah writes on a tablet "*His name is John*" – his speech is restored and his first utterance is praise of God (the *Benedictus* – which follows the set reading [vv.68-79]). Luke's emphasis is on the fulfilment of Gabriel's prophecy and the reverent wonder and awe (rather than 'fear', which is the word used in this translation) experienced by those who get to hear what has happened and the questions raised by them about the nature of this momentous event and its implications for the child. There is powerful Old Testament reference in that C1st Jews would recall God's instructions to Abraham and Moses about circumcision [Genesis 17:12; Leviticus 12:3] and the circumcision of Isaac [Genesis 21:3]. In this way, the child becomes one of God's covenant people and heir to the promises made by God to Abraham. C1st Jews would also be struck by the divine involvement in these events, the break with tradition in relation to naming, and the sense of the imminence of some radically new direction.

The Second Sunday in Advent

Old Testament Lesson: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Compressed into 3 short chapters, the book of the prophet Zephaniah explores the familiar themes of prophecy of the time before the Babylonian exile. There is scathing denunciation of the corrupt leadership of Jerusalem, with its idolatrous religious practices and oppression of the poor. There are oracles against the surrounding nations and an account of a great day of reckoning, followed by restoration and the gathering of exiles back to their homeland. Today's reading is a concluding oracle of salvation. While most of the book seems to have been written before king Josiah's great reform in 621 BC, this last section seems to have an exilic context (in other words, contemporary with the Babylonian exile), the book having moved beyond the 7th person of Zephaniah to serve the exiled community of the following century. A Christian reading might associate this with the Advent theme of anticipation, not only of the birth of Jesus, but of his coming again in glory and judgement, culminating in the ultimate realisation of the kingdom of God.

New Testament Lesson: Luke 1:5-20

After the prologue, Luke's gospel opens with the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist. It is rooted in Hebrew scripture and Jewish observance – the sense that what is about to unfold is the continuation and fulfilment of what has gone before. The scene is the Temple – the epicentre of 1st Judaism. Zechariah was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, the eighth of 24 divisions of priests, who served in the temple twice each year for a week at a time. His wife, Elizabeth, was a descendant of Israel's first priest, Aaron. Zechariah encounters the angel Gabriel (meaning *God is my hero*) when offering incense in the sanctuary of the Temple, immediately in front of the holy of holies. A messenger from God announcing an apparently miraculous birth would, to a 1st audience, call to mind a number of Old Testament stories (Sarah and Isaac; Leah and Reuben; Hannah and Samuel; and the unnamed wife of Manoa and Samson). The name 'John' means *God has shown favour* (Elizabeth's childlessness, until then, would have been regarded as a mark of divine disfavour). John's abstinence from 'wine and strong drink' would demonstrate his commitment to his God-given role; the same words are used in the Old Testament in relation to Samson's mother and Samuel. However, there is also a sense of God inaugurating a decisive new turn. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit before he is born and (spirit-filled, like Elijah) will prepare a people for the Advent of the Lord. Symbolic of how hard the Jews will find it to accept John the Baptist and then Jesus, the righteous Zechariah, steeped in the old ways, cannot at first accept what Gabriel tells him, and is struck dumb.

The First Sunday of Advent

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 2:1-5

Today's reading is from the first part of Isaiah in which the prophet addresses Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom of Judah, around the time of the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel. His message is that God's people have condemned themselves by their disobedience and, as result, Judah – including Jerusalem - will fall. This passage immediately follows an oracle in which the prophet indicts all the people, north and south, for their infidelity. He then anticipates the time when God's saving work will have been accomplished. All nations will be drawn to a purified and triumphant Jerusalem so that they may learn God's law (the Torah) and, as a result, will "*walk in his paths*". There are echoes of this, with its reference to 'light', in the *Nunc Dimittis* – the Song of Simeon. God will judge and arbitrate between disputing nations and institute an eternal and universal end to war. Weapons will be reworked into tools for the cultivation of abundant harvests.

New Testament Lesson: Luke 12:35-48

This passage concerns the need for constant readiness for the advent of God's kingdom, especially on the part of disciples (then and now). Jesus encourages a sense of urgent expectation (the very opposite of religious complacency) with the image of a master's unpredictable return from a wedding banquet (perhaps, symbolic of his enthronement in heaven) when – in an astonishing reversal of social norms, which is typical of Luke – the master will wait upon those of his servants who, in anticipation of his coming, are ready to open the door to him. Peter asks if this message is just for the disciples or for everyone. Jesus makes plain that disciples have particular responsibilities and will face commensurate punishment for failure. But those whose lack of preparedness is due to ignorance will have some mitigation. Luke may, at least in part, have been addressing a problem in the early church, in that the imminent return of Jesus had been expected but had not happened. To meet that problem, and to refocus the church on the here and now, Luke stresses both that Jesus will return and that any delay must not impede preparedness in the form of correct belief and practice.

The 25th Sunday after Trinity; the Next Sunday before Advent

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 5:1-7

This lesson is from the first part of Isaiah, in which the prophet addresses Jerusalem in a time of danger (at around the time when Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC). His relentless message is that YHWH's people have condemned themselves by their rebellion against God and the city will fall. It deploys imagery to do with vineyards and wine, representing the relationship between God and the people. Such imagery runs right through the Old and New Testaments.

In Genesis, Noah is said to be the first to plant a vineyard (and to get incapably drunk). There is the famous story of Naboth's vineyard. In Leviticus, vineyards should be managed so as to be a source of relief for the poor. In Psalm 80 the vineyard stands for Israel, both destroyed and restored by God; in Amos the vineyard is a key feature of restoration after the agony and alienation of the Babylonian exile; and in that strange collection of ancient erotic poetry, the Song of Songs, the vineyard is a place of abundance and sexual fulfilment. In the New Testament, we immediately think of the wedding at Cana, Jesus' claim to be the true vine, and – of course – the Eucharist.

It is easy to see why this is. Grapes are not just for wine, they are an important source of food, both when they are fresh and when they are stored as raisins. To establish a vineyard takes a long time, sophisticated expertise, and constant care. A successful vineyard, demands a high degree of virtuous human dedication, combined with acquired and passed on skills. This readily translates into imagery to do with virtuous individuals combining to create a just, prosperous community. Today's reading exemplifies this, ending with a hint of what can go wrong if those working the vineyard break the trust of the owner.

New Testament lesson: Luke 19:29-38

This is Luke's account of Jesus' approach to Jerusalem at the culmination of his earthly ministry. All 4 gospels describe this event. Luke's has some distinctive features. Firstly, Jesus is not depicted actually entering the city. Just after today's passage, he weeps over it, then goes to the temple. 'People' (it is not clear who they are) lay their cloaks on the road but, explicitly, it is disciples who put their cloaks on the colt or donkey, as a sort of saddle, and it is disciples who acclaim Jesus in the words of Psalm 118. Commonly, this acclamation is contrasted with the later calls to crucify Jesus as an example of the fickleness of crowds. However, in Luke's account it is apparent that these are not the same people. The disciples' acclamation does not refer to the kingdom of David (as in Mark's account), but a king coming 'in the name of the Lord' invoking 'peace in heaven, glory in highest heaven', seeming to make unequivocal that this is heavenly, not earthly royalty.

The 24th Sunday after Trinity

If the Lectionary's choice of readings (from Daniel and Revelation) for this act of worship seem a little arbitrary, it is worth recalling that Revelation is sometimes said to be a continuation of Daniel. They certainly share characteristics, the most obvious being the apocalyptic visions of the end time, the *eschaton*, establishing the universal kingship of God. It is hard to overemphasise the importance of this idea in the Old and New Testaments; it is at the heart of much Biblical theology. Integral to it is to see history as unfolding, as God intends, towards that end and to understand earthly events being played out in the context of a cosmic war between good and evil, being fought at a higher dimension of reality – the history of the world as heavenly conflict.

Old Testament lesson: Daniel 10:19-21

The book of Daniel was the last book of the Old Testament to be completed (though it may well incorporate much older stories). The first 6 chapters consist of a series of narratives about its hero, Daniel, concerning his influence in Babylon during the period of exile; Daniel's faithfulness to God and his Jewish identity are extolled, as is God's protection of Daniel. By this, history is seen as the working out of the purposes of Israel's universally sovereign God. However, the book was probably written nearly 400 years later, at the time of the Jewish Maccabean revolt. This came about when the Seleucid dynasty (inheritors of much of the lands conquered by Alexander the Great) tried to Hellenise the Jews by forcibly extinguishing their culture, at the core of which was their religion, replacing it with Greek ways. Reference to the 'book of truth', with which today's reading ends, is that in which God's purposes for history are written. Gabriel reveals this to Daniel, imparting wisdom while reassuring him of ultimate success. Babylonian oppression was an obvious cipher for Seleucid tyranny and the encouragement to those in revolt is plain.

New Testament lesson: Revelation 4

This passage immediately follows a vision of Jesus and messages to the seven churches. John is granted a vision of God on His throne. The text is packed with Old Testament reference (especially to Isaiah and Ezekiel) and complex imagery – the interpretation of which has been argued over by scholars for centuries. A good commentary can take us into the foothills of this extraordinary writing. Here, I will offer a few signposts, but it should be understood how contested this is. The ultimate reality is God's universal sovereignty, represented by His throne and His gem-like glory. God's purposes for the cosmos must, inevitably, be realised at the culmination of history. The throne room is both the place from which God rules the cosmos and a temple where He is worshipped and acknowledged as sovereign by heavenly attendants of various kinds. The creatures said to be like a lion, an ox, a human, and an eagle are drawn from Ezekiel's description of God's throne-chariot [Ezekiel 1:10]. These were probably intended to be heavenly archetypes of all animate creation, but they have been adopted by Christian tradition to refer to the Evangelists.

Remembrance Sunday/3rd Sunday before Advent

Pain and To the Poet Before Battle by Ivor Gurney

The poet and composer, Ivor Gurney, has been rather eclipsed in recent years by Wilfred Owen. It may be helpful to remember that Owen published only 5 poems during the Great War and this handful made virtually no impact at the time. Furthermore, his poetry was not typical, even among combatants, of the then contemporary attitudes towards the war.

Ivor Gurney joined the Gloucester Regiment as a volunteer. He fought on the Somme and was shot through the arm at Arras. Within 6 weeks, he was back at the front and became his platoon's crack shot. He then became a machine gunner. His war ended at Passchendaele, where he was gassed. Therefore, he was a man who had experienced fighting in three of the bloodiest battles of the war.

Unlike Owen, a collection of Gurney's poetry was published during the war, *Severn and Somme*, in November 1917. He did not flinch from the horrors of war, as in his sonnet *Pain*, which was written to the memory of Rupert Brooke. But in Gurney's poetry, by comparison with that of Owen, we find a far more rounded picture of contemporary experience and response: as well as the suffering, there is a wholesome patriotism, courage, love of country and countryside, and love of comrades and family. And we find clear expression of the war being in a just cause, as in his poem called, *To the Poet Before Battle*.

The Old Testament lesson: Deuteronomy 17:14-20

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. In today's reading, the exercise of absolute power by a monarch is prohibited. Unlike the unlimited law-making by kings of the surrounding nations, Davidic kings are themselves subject to the law and must read the Torah daily. Saying that kings must not accumulate wealth, wives, and horses may well be a dig at the excesses of Solomon.

New Testament lesson: 1 Timothy 2:1-7

1 Timothy is one of the 'Pastoral Epistles', so called because they are concerned with the internal life, behaviour, and governance of Christian communities. Today's reading is an instruction relating to prayer. Prayers should be for everyone – including "*kings and ... all that are in authority*" (this possibly reflecting the accommodation with Rome for the sake of peace for the church). The one creator God's saving purpose (mediated by Jesus Christ) is said to be universal.

All Saints Day

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 35:1-10

The first part of Isaiah (from which this reading comes) addresses Jerusalem in a time of increased uncertainty and danger (at around the time when Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC). The relentless message is that YHWH's, the Lord's, people have rebelled against him. Judah (the southern kingdom) and Jerusalem have condemned themselves and will fall. Today's lesson immediately follows an oracle against Edom (the region to the south of the Dead Sea which had prospered after falling to the Babylonians). That oracle, in Ch.34, is a combination of judgement on Edom and the threat of universal, indeed cosmic, upheaval. Ch. 35, by contrast, is a prophecy of salvation for those restored to Jerusalem after the cataclysm of defeat and exile (in this, it anticipates Deutero or Second Isaiah, Chs 40-55). The usual idea of the wilderness as a place of threat is reversed; it is portrayed as a place of abundance (symbolic of restoration). This is followed by more such imagery (such as sight and hearing restored). A highway for the redeemed (a Holy Way), which may be travelled safely, leads to a joyful, restored Zion. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus refers to these verses in response to John the Baptist's question, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' [Matthew 11:5].

New Testament lesson: Luke 9:18-27

Luke has reached the culmination of Jesus' Galilean ministry, before travelling to Jerusalem. He has commissioned the apostles to proclaim the kingdom of God and given them the power to cure diseases and authority over demons. They had gone out and done as he asked – away from his physical presence - and reported back. This reading comes immediately after the feeding of the 5,000. It contains Peter's confession, Jesus' command to silence, the requirements of discipleship, and Jesus' enigmatic prediction that, 'There are some standing

here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God'. It will be immediately followed by Luke's account of the transfiguration. The depth and complexity of this passage are far beyond the scope of this short introduction and a surface reading will not do justice to its richness and meaning. A good commentary would help. I can only identify a few questions. What is the real significance of the feeding miracle and to what extent, if at all, does it function as a prologue to today's reading? Does Peter speak for himself or on behalf of all the disciples? What does Peter mean when he identifies Jesus as 'the Messiah of God'. And why does Jesus refer to himself differently as 'the Son of Man'? And why, when Jesus has commissioned disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God, does he then instruct them not to tell anyone what he has just said about his forthcoming rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection? What does it mean daily to take up one's own cross, an instrument of torture and death? What is the relationship between that and the coming of the Son of Man? What does that 'coming' entail? In what sense would any of Jesus' listeners see the kingdom of God before they died? If this was a prediction by Jesus, was he right?

The 20th Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 59:9-20

That part of the book of Isaiah which runs from Ch.56 to the end, is usually referred to as Trito- or Third Isaiah. These eleven chapters appear to be from a later period than Deutero/Second Isaiah (in which the prophet addresses the people who are exiled in Babylon). Perhaps the prophet was in Jerusalem, after the return from exile, when restoration of the city and religious life was proceeding slowly among a disillusioned and demoralised community. The focus is on the destiny of Jerusalem, looking from an unsatisfactory present to an apocalyptic vision of a purified people and a glorified Jerusalem as capital of the religious world. The first 7 verses of today's reading form a lament, combining confession and expressions of resultant wretchedness. God's response follows, appalled that He alone has the will to act. The imagery is that of the intervention of the Lord as a divine warrior, repaying the sinful in kind, but redeeming such of those Israelites who turn from sin, as He returns to Zion – the idealised, restored Jerusalem.

New Testament lesson: Luke 14:1-14

On a number of occasions [5:29, 7:36, 11:37], Luke describes debates in the context of a meal (the idea of a banquet at the fulfilment of time is commonly found in scripture). In today's reading, Jesus uses the meal itself to make an important theological point. First, however, at a sabbath meal in the house of a prominent Pharisee (being watched closely for any false move) Jesus puts the scribes and Pharisees on the spot by asking them whether it is lawful to cure people of illness on the sabbath. He asks this because a little earlier, he had been criticised for healing a crippled woman who had come to the synagogue where he was teaching on the sabbath (to the shame of his opponents on that occasion, he had justified his action in terms of freeing the woman from Satan-imposed bondage). At the meal, the scribes and Pharisees can give no answer and, there and then, Jesus heals a man with dropsy. The story then develops the theme of 'reversal', which pervades Luke's gospel. We see it from very early in the gospel, when Mary, as she sings the song we know as the *Magnificat*, expresses wonder that she has been 'magnified' by God, who has put down the mighty from their seat, exalted the humble and meek, and sent the rich away empty while filling the hungry with good things. Guests must not presume to judge for themselves where they should sit; they risk the humiliation of being moved down (this question about priority is echoed in Luke's account of the Last Supper – 22:24-7). And, Jesus attacks the idea of only inviting guests who are in a position to reciprocate – saying that those too poor to do so should be asked. The effect of this teaching would have been sharpened by the importance at that time, even greater than today, of meals as symbols of status and when questions of shame and honour were core public values. Therefore, Luke has Jesus overturn conventional ideas of reciprocity, shame, honour, and hierarchy.

The 19th Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 54:1-14

This passage is from Deutero or Second Isaiah, in which the prophet addresses the people who are exiled in Babylon. A major motif is that of Jerusalem/Zion as mother of a dispersed family. Restoration is anticipated, using the imagery of a woman who will no longer be forsaken, bereaved, or infertile. Not only will the ‘mother’ have many children (so many that her ‘habitations’ must be enlarged) but the new Jerusalem will be a jewelled city in which the people will be prosperous and free from fear and oppression: this act of redemption being performed by the one creator God.

New Testament lesson: Luke 13:31-5

This short reading exemplifies the genius of the gospel writers. Its handful of lines are packed with reference and nuanced meaning. Pharisees are usually depicted negatively. Here, however, some of them warn Jesus that Herod is after him. But is it as straightforward as them being fair-minded, or even supportive? Jesus’ response shows that he knows that they will be reporting back to Herod. He does move on, but not because of their warning; he does so in fulfilment of God’s purposes: his earthly ministry must culminate in Jerusalem. Calling Herod a ‘fox’, is to evoke proverbial cunning, weakness, and cruelty. By referring to Jerusalem, Jesus associates himself with the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, and their rejection by the very people they strove to save. ‘Jerusalem’ stands for those people and Jesus, rather than denouncing them, expresses an anguished, maternal care and yearning (echoing Isaiah’s ‘motherhood’ imagery). He expresses concern for the welfare of the city but knows that he will be rejected. The last words quote Psalm 118.26.

The 18th Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 50:4-10

This passage is from Deutero or Second Isaiah, in which the prophet addresses the people who are exiled in Babylon. As we have seen, from the start of chapter 49, there seems to be a change. There are no more references to Cyrus, the Persian king who took Babylon and who (by Jewish tradition) permitted the return from exile. Jerusalem rather than Babylon becomes the centre of attention. This passage is from the third of a sequence of four ‘Servant Songs’. The ‘servant’ appears to be 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. While the servant may stand, among other possibilities, for Israel, the Christian reading of this is obvious. The prophetic individual (the ‘servant’) to whom Isaiah gives a voice has been given, by YHWH, the Lord, the ability to speak wisely but he will be reviled. And yet, he will be sustained and vindicated (by comparison with his tormentors).

New Testament lesson: Luke 13:22-30

This reading can seem rather strange at first. Luke is making a number of points. The issue is raised of whether all, or some, or only a few will be saved – whatever salvation means. Then, as now, this exercised the minds of many believers – and is too big a subject for these short introductory notes. Luke stresses the urgency of Jesus’ ministry and the response it demands. He warns against complacency. Those with a complacent sense of entitlement who turn up late, will not be admitted, having effectively excluded themselves. Prior association with the metaphorical master of the house will count for nothing (this might apply to nominal followers of Jesus with insufficient commitment, as much as to the Jews who rejected him). The founding fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) will be joined by Gentiles, “*from the east, ... the west, ... the north, and from the south*”, in fulfilment of prophecies of the universal recognition of God’s limitless sovereignty (as we find, for example, in Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-3). That “*some are*

last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last” is a typically Lukan reversal of expected values.

The 17th Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 49:13-23

In Deutero or Second Isaiah the prophet has been addressing the people who are exiled in Babylon. From the start of chapter 49, there seems to be a change. There are no more references to Cyrus, the Persian king who took Babylon and who (by Jewish tradition) permitted the return from exile. Jerusalem rather than Babylon becomes the centre of attention. Today’s reading begins with an exuberant psalm, calling on the heavens and earth to exult in God’s concern for his people. Those people complain about the trauma of exile – how could God let this happen to them? God’s answer is that his care for the people is even more steadfast than that of a mother for her child. They will be restored and will flourish. Jerusalem will be rebuilt. The “nations” (the non-Jewish peoples occupying Israel and Judah) are in for a rough time.

New Testament lesson: Luke 12:1-12

This passage comes in an extended section of the gospel in which Jesus challenges religious and secular authority. As I explained last week, the vehemence of his attack on the Pharisees may have something to do with the circumstances in which Luke’s gospel was being written, in particular competition between the early Jesus movement and the revived, synagogue-based Judaism which was led by Pharisees, centred at Jamnia. But the underlying points retain their power. Here, the image of yeast is used to refer to the effect of invisible but pervasive hypocrisy. However, Jesus says, nothing can be hidden from God. He then calls upon the disciples to be fearless in the face of persecution – God’s judgement, which extends beyond death, is to be more feared than any human threat. Words spoken against Jesus in life may be forgiven, but the orientation of one’s life in rejection of the Holy Spirit will not.

The 16th Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 48:12-21

The prophet continues to reflect on the return to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile which, by Jewish tradition, was permitted by the Persian king, Cyrus (called ‘Messiah’ by Isaiah), after he captured Babylon on 539 BC. Today’s reading begins with a summons to attention (using the language of the law court). The ‘him’ who has been called by God, seems to be Cyrus and Babylon’s fall is presented as part of the divine plan. The people are portrayed as having been stubbornly disobedient - for which they have paid a heavy price – but they will now be able to go back to Jerusalem, which will be restored. The concluding verse (about there being ‘no peace for the wicked’) is a sort of editorial comment which serves two purposes: it tells the people not to be complacent, despite the promise of restoration; it also marks the end of a discrete section of the book as, from here, Jerusalem rather than Babylon is the focus.

New Testament lesson: Luke 11:37-54

This passage is headed “*Jesus denounces Pharisees and lawyers*”. Of course, as I of all people realise, lawyers deserve everything they get. But this may be a bit hard on the Pharisees who, unlike the hereditary castes who served the Jerusalem Temple, seem to have been a bit more like parish priests – often poor, conscientious and much concerned with purity. The vehemence of this attack may have something to do with the circumstances in which Luke’s gospel was being written. After the destruction, in 70 AD, of the Temple and its cult by the Romans, there was competition between the early Jesus movement and the revived, synagogue-based Judaism which was led by Pharisees, centred at Jamnia. But the

underlying point retains its power: outward, mechanistic observance of laws relating to ritual purity, are no substitute for purity of heart, love of God, true justice, and loving action. The last two verses, which describe the scribes and Pharisees lying in wait to catch Jesus out, suggest an air of gathering menace.

The 15th Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 45:9-22

The Cyrus Oracle continues. Cyrus, the Persian king who captured Babylon in 539 BC and, by Jewish tradition, allowed the captive people to return to Jerusalem, is depicted as being God's anointed (Messiah), commissioned by God to carry out His purposes. In today's reading, the prophet refutes those who question Cyrus' mission. People created by God can no more question his purposes than clay question the potter. Foreign nations will acknowledge the God of Israel as the one true God. God is affirmed as the single, universal sovereign creator; salvation is promised to Israel and all the nations.

New Testament lesson: Revelation 14:1-5

It may be unnecessary to repeat the suggestion of a good commentary for help in unravelling the dense imagery and allusion of Revelation. Last week, we heard of the victory of Michael and his angels in heaven, casting down the devil and his angels to earth, with the warning of the devil's wrath because he knows his final defeat is near. Today's reading is the first of three visions intended to reassure the faithful of ultimate victory and vindication. The end time is near. The '144,000' constitute a great army (perhaps standing for the whole people of God – both Jew and Gentile) which will do final battle with 'the beast'. They are 'blameless' (i.e. without physical defect – a requirement for soldiers, as for sacrificial animals) and have been sexually abstinent – a ritual purity in preparation for holy war, echoing passages in Deuteronomy 23:9, 1 Samuel 21:5, and 2 Samuel 11:11.

The 14th Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 44:24-45, 45:8

The first part of Isaiah (chapters 1-39) addresses Jerusalem in a time of increased uncertainty and danger (at around the time when Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC). Today's reading comes in Deutero or Second Isaiah, in which the prophet addresses the people who are exiled in Babylon. It is known as the 'Cyrus oracle'. Cyrus, king of Persia, captured Babylon in 539 BC and allowed a return of the Israelites to Jerusalem. Isaiah calls him the anointed (i.e. *the Messiah*). Isaiah says that Cyrus has been commissioned by the God. It might be noted that Cyrus himself, on a cylinder dated 538 BC, attributed his success to the Babylonian god, Marduk. The poem ends with an assertion of God's unique creative character, acknowledging that He is the source of both darkness and light, woe and joy. But ultimately, righteousness flows from God's created order.

New Testament lesson: Revelation 12:1-12

Revelation is so challenging that, as I have said before, a good commentary is needed to make a start on unpicking the multiple levels of imagery and reference. It may help to have another look at the notes for the last two weeks which can easily be found by following the link on the Glapthorn Church website homepage. Today's reading envisages the final, titanic, cosmic conflict, at both heavenly and earthly levels. There is a symbolic account of the birth of Jesus, his death and resurrection (though the woman referred to could stand both for Mary and Mother Zion or Jerusalem). Evil is portrayed as a dragon - alluding both to the serpent in Eden and the sea monster, Leviathan, in Isaiah 27, representing the powers of chaos. But there is also allusion to a number of related Ancient Near Eastern myths, including that of Leto giving birth to

Apollo, and Apollo's destruction of the great dragon, Python. There is also the Babylonian story of the sea monster, Tiamat, being hewed in pieces by the young god of light, Marduk – the god worshipped by Cyrus who, as we have heard in Isaiah, liberated the Israelites from Babylonian captivity. This is only to scratch the surface.

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=5WSe0kv6ICU>

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.