

The Faithful Sheep Pastoral Letters

Strength and Encouragement for the Christian Flock

Oliver Bayley

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome! This book is one of the titles produced by Faithful Sheep Ministries.

The aim of Faithful Sheep Ministries is to strengthen and encourage our fellow Christians in this age of challenge and confusion. We particularly have in mind those Christians who lack Bible teaching on a regular basis, but who love the Lord and His Word, and who seek to serve Him as His "faithful sheep" in this needy world.

We aim to offer timely Bible teaching and reflection through a variety of ministries. Our theological stance is one of biblical orthodoxy, centred on the Historic Christian Creeds and the 39 Articles of the Church of England. The Director of Faithful Sheep Ministries is the Rev. Oliver Bayley, an experienced evangelical Anglican minister based in Southampton, England.

The thirty Pastoral Letters in this book originally appeared in our monthly Faithful Sheep Letter that was published until a few years ago. A few of these Letters have references to the season or political events of the time. We have not removed these for this Combined Edition as the spiritual topics which are being addressed remain timeless and ever-relevant for us.

Each of the Letters is designed to bring encouragement, and to prompt you into quiet reflection and practical response in your Christian discipleship. These Letters tend to be meaty, and are best if well-chewed! We suggest each Letter is read unhurriedly, say just one per day, with your Bible to hand. You may prefer to read the same Letter each day for a week.

Our hope is that the Lord will graciously use these Letters as a further source of His blessings upon you.

Letter 1 Walking with God

As the Lord gazes upon us all, I wonder - what does He see? What strikes Him? And what does He want to tell us, arising from all that He sees?

Think about it.

Does He not see, above all, that His children are all in a hurry? He sees us worrying and scurrying, dashing from place to place, and from task to task.

"I haven't the time!" we cry, "too much to do – must get on!".

Yes? Is that a fair description of how you are living your life?

Did Jesus ever run??

But was Jesus ever in a hurry? Did He ever *run*? Those are very good questions!

I can think of no occasion in the Gospels when Jesus felt the need to run. Instead, wherever we encounter Him, we sense that He is quietly and calmly in control of the situation. People do not fluster Him. Events do not fluster Him. Always He keeps steady, and of course always He is keeping wide open the channels to and from His heavenly Father.

Think of the occasion when the synagogue ruler, Jairus, thrusts through the crowd, begging Jesus to come and heal his young daughter¹. Jesus would have had other plans for that day! – and here was an interruption. How easy for Him to regard this as an intrusion, a nuisance, a distraction – perhaps all the more so as this was a local "bigwig" who might well have been saying negative things about Jesus to his congregation.

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¹ Matthew 9 and parallels

But no. As always, Jesus responds, and sets off for Jairus' house – only to be interrupted yet again. This time He feels His healing power being drawn upon, drained from Him. "Who touched me?", He pauses to ask amidst the shoving crowd. "It was me", confesses the elderly woman, who finds herself wonderfully healed. "Go in peace ...".

Beautiful! There in the midst of all the hurly-burly we see how Jesus constantly walks with God the Father. Nothing is able to alter His steady rhythm, hour by hour, day by day, spent consciously in the company of His Father.

And we, Jesus' disciples of today, are called to do the same, to imitate Him, to "walk with God".

Walking with God

But what does that phrase actually mean, "walking with God", for each of us in today's busy world? Does it not mean just this: that we are to go through each hour of each day conscious that we are in the presence of God, with all that involves?

We can talk to Him, look to Him, listen for Him, listen to Him, praise Him, seek His guidance. The Holy Spirit will gradually enable us to look at life as the Lord God Himself looks at life. We will learn something more of His joy, or pain, or anger, as He considers all under His gaze. What a privilege we are given!

Now of course there are many times when we are called upon to concentrate intently on what we are doing. But even in those times there are still going to be pauses, when we can turn again to God our Father and gratefully acknowledge His sovereign presence.

So the one who walks with God is the one who has developed a very simple habit: the habit of naturally and frequently referring to Almighty God, many times a day.

Enoch and Noah

We can call to mind an illustrious pair from the Old Testament who serve as good examples of this habit of walking with God. We are told that both Enoch and Noah walked with God²³.

Here are two great men of God from years gone by; if we come to be remotely like either of them we shall be doing well! Each of them stood up for God and His ways over the many years of their lives.

They probably didn't get thanked or praised or admired. Instead they would be more used to being sniggered at, talked about, ignored, humiliated. But come what may, each man stuck to his task and "walked with God". What an example for us!

The "Goldilocks" Option

We might ask what is it about walking that makes it such a suitable description of our spiritual lives? Why is walking the "Goldilocks option" - not too fast, not too slow, but just about right!?

First of all, walking means we don't get too tired. If we are reasonably fit, and used to walking, then we can probably keep walking for most of the day, and clock up a good few miles. Walking is easy on the body, natural, even calming.

Next, we cannot walk if we are in a stressed-out rush! Then, we will try to dash. We will get breathless, sweaty, cross – and very soon have to stop running and – walk!

By walking, we demonstrate a calm, a perspective, a sense that all is well, that there is time, and that what we are doing is in itself worthy, at this very moment. Walking forces us to slow down, and take life at a sensible pace.

In days gone by, the local Vicar would be seen out and about, walking in his parish. It was a statement of availability – he wasn't too

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² Genesis 5.24

³ Genesis 6.9

busy to stop and have a word, or even lean on a gate for half an hour for a natter if it came to it. He had time. He was there, visible, available, even vulnerable. He offered his presence and his time to whoever happened to be around – and walking was the key. A bike was not quite so good – he could wave a cheery arm, but then passed by. And of course a car was hopeless! A driver is sealed off in a car, and is clearly going somewhere else, probably late, in a hurry, and stressed!

No - walking is the key.

When we are walking, time is servant; time is sorted, time is secondary. One who walks does not have to get to the end of this journey as soon as possible or sooner! There is time.

And along the way there is time to look, to see, to listen, to think, to talk, to pray. Above all, there is the time to *be*, to look up at the clouds, the trees, the great sky, to gaze, absorb, receive, and simply to thank God afresh for all His mercies. What a blessing to be reminded by such sights how gloriously small we are, and yet each of us is held in the hands of the infinite and wonderful Creator!

Sitting still

But notice something else about walking. It may not get you to where you are going very quickly, but it does get you there! If walking avoids the drawbacks of running, it also avoids the drawbacks of sitting still!

Sitting still is of course sometimes necessary, especially when we are waiting on the Lord for guidance or provision. Think of the Israelites camping in the wilderness. They would sit still and wait just as long as the pillar of cloud and fire remained static over the camp. But when the pillar moved, it was a matter of striking the tents, loading up – and walking on with the Lord⁴.

"Wait for the gift my Father promised ..." were amongst the Lord's final words to the disciples gathered round Him at the time of His

⁴Exodus 13.21-22; Numbers 14.14

ascension⁵. Yes, that was another occasion when they just had to sit still and wait, for their instincts to dash ahead announcing the risen Jesus to the world would have been all wrong. But when the Holy Spirit was given shortly afterwards, the time for sitting still was past – it was then a question of "All hands on deck!".

For sitting still can be very easily overdone. It can be so tempting, for apparently all the right reasons, to sit still spiritually and do nothing, when waiting for an order to move forward. But perhaps such an order will not come, because it is not necessary! Perhaps the Lord is saying, "Walk forward my child, you know enough to be going on with, and by sitting still you are actually being disobedient".

We can think of Mary and Martha here. Mary was strong on the sitting still – perhaps at times rather too strong! No wonder Martha got fed up with her, for *somebody* had to do the work. We can imagine just how annoying Martha must have found that frequently dreamy expression on her sister's face!

But then of course Martha herself had things to learn. She was evidently someone who found it very difficult to stop, to sit still, to listen, to be. The Lord's words to her (Luke 10.40-42) must have hurt, but He spoke what she needed to hear.

Dashing ahead

Walking with God means we will also gain protection from the other extreme – of spiritually dashing everywhere!

You know the sort of thing, from your own life perhaps, or from the lives of fellow Christians around you. Here the emphasis is always on "UP AND AT 'EM!". If I'm not always doing something, anything, for the Lord, then clearly I'm being a lazy, good-for-nothing Christian sheep. Yes? And the results are never long in coming: guilt, exhaustion, frustration, even despair.

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⁵ Acts 1.4

But dashing through life does not just grind us down spiritually; it can actually mean that we never truly *live* at all. Because of the pace and rush of today, we can very easily become entirely impoverished.

Are we living, or merely existing? If we never *physically* walk, our actual living – as opposed to just existing – may well be pretty thin. Life could well consist of an endless "mad dash" – but a dash to where? – and trying to achieve just what exactly??!

If that applies to a physical walk, how much more so does it apply to our *spiritual* walk? If we are not walking spiritually with God day by day, but rather we are dashing, grabbing, flitting, what is the gain? – for Him, for us, for others? Not a lot!

"Vanity, vanity!" are the words that come to mind⁶; that is, endless amounts of time, energy and effort are expended, which achieve absolutely nothing at all of any value or worth. What an outcome!

Now it is quite true that the Holy Spirit does speak to us through St Paul about running⁷. But look at the context and the message that is being given. This running is in the context of **focus**, of a deliberate, no-messing-about intention to serve the Lord fully and faithfully and constantly.

Just as those Olympic athletes of a few weeks ago trained and concentrated to win the prize, just so are we as Christians to be doing the same thing. Paul uses the picture of the athlete, not to tell us to run as fast as we can through life, in an attempt to do every conceivable good deed we can think of to keep in with the Lord! – but to serve the Lord in a truly single-minded, sensible, focused way.

God's Chosen Pace

So in spiritual terms we come across three different speeds – running, walking and sitting.

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⁶ Ecclesiastes 1.2

⁷ I Corinthians 9.24ff

How subtle is the devil at drawing us away from the ideal spiritual pace of walking. He will urge us to run, or he will urge us to sit and do nothing – both perhaps for the apparent best of reasons. But he will never urge us to walk!

There is no doubt that spiritually **God's chosen pace for us is a walking pace**. We are called to "walk with God", day by day. That little phrase sums up so much of what it means to live as God's redeemed children. By walking with God, our chances of remaining as faithful sheep amidst any circling wolves are far, far greater.

Assurance

For our walk is based on the quiet assurance that all is well. For God is on the throne: fact. He is working His purposes out, and His will shall come to pass.

Nothing shall thwart Him, surprise Him, outwit Him. Think of anything that scares you, for now or for the future: it is no problem to the living God, and nothing will stand in His way.

Jesus Christ is Lord – another fact. He is the same, yesterday, today and forever. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the Resurrection and the Life. He is the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World⁸. A day shall come when every knee *shall* bow, and every tongue *shall* confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord: fact!⁹

By grace and faith, we are redeemed children of God, loved, saved, and in the process of being sanctified: fact! "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"¹⁰. The answer is – **nothing!** "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose"¹¹.

And of course the list of such Scriptures is a long one – every such verse being a promise of God's reality, power and active love.

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⁸ These are some of the "I am" sayings found in John's Gospel

⁹ Philippians 2.10-11

¹⁰ Rom 8.35

¹¹ Rom 8.28

Walk with God, not the other way round! ...

We now come to a small but telling point about our walking with God.

Think of a shepherd with his flock. Who is "the boss"? Who is actually to walk with whom?

A sheep might say "Please, Mr Shepherd, walk with me today". That sheep is getting something right – he is acknowledging the presence of the shepherd, and the sheep's own need of the shepherd. But see what he is getting wrong!

He is viewing life from his own, sheepy, point of view still. He is thinking that the shepherd's task is to support the sheep as the sheep walks the walk, "doing his own thing". The sheep is actually seeing himself as the focus, with the shepherd being the helper.

Won't the shepherd's reply be along the lines of, "Let's remember who is who round here! You stick close to me, Ram-beau – then you will be in the right place to receive the help you need".

Too many of our prayers spring from this mistaken perspective! "Lord help me!" is a fine prayer in the right context, but often it springs from our making this same mistake: that God is walking with me, that it is my path, my choice, and that God's task is to smooth out any difficulties I encounter along my chosen path.

No! As one seeking to be a faithful sheep, the emphasis is to be on my walking with God, not on God walking with me!

God is the Focus, not me. God is the Shepherd, not me. God is the Decider, not me. It is His walk, on which I am allowed to accompany Him. It is not my walk, with me deigning to give Him attention when I want Him to do something.

It is by God's grace that we are bidden to walk with Him. The Lord draws us into His work, because He graciously chooses to. He delights in our involvement – He loves us and shows us His love, and we in turn are to love Him and show Him our love.

So our prayer changes focus: "Lord enable me please to walk with you faithfully today". That prayer gets things right.

Of course we need the Lord's help constantly - nobody is denying that for a moment - but that help is primarily to enable us to serve Him more faithfully, rather than for Him to be hanging about waiting to meet our needs when requested.

The fact is: *He* is the Shepherd, we are just the sheep.

So we have seen that the best way, the God-intended way, for us to receive and appreciate and share all these blessings, is to *walk with God*: not only to sit with Him, vital though that is at times, and not only to keep pushing ahead trying to serve Him as effectively as we can.

Are you too much of a Martha? Or too much of a Mary? Or perhaps you are already a real little Goldilocks, getting it just about right!

Letter 2 Shalom

"Shalom!"

In Letter 1 we were thinking about what it means for us to "walk with God" day by day. This time we can take this theme a little further, as we consider one of the main effects of our walking with God – our dwelling within the state of "shalom".

"Shalom" is a Hebrew word rich in meaning. Putting it briefly, it involves **peace**, peace in all its fullness: peace with God; peace with self; peace with others; and peace with creation. Other English words used to translate "shalom" include "favour", "health", "prosperity", "rest" and "welfare". It involves a sense of wholeness, of completeness, of overall well-being.

The Lord told Abram (Genesis 15.15) – "Thou shalt go to thy fathers in *peace*" – in shalom. The Lord commended Phinehas (Numbers 25.12) – "Behold, I give unto him my covenant of *peace*" – shalom. We are to pray for the "shalom" of Jerusalem (Psalm 122.6). The Lord of hosts abhors the covetous prophets and priests (Jeremiah 6.9ff) – "They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Shalom, shalom – when there is no shalom".

A Spiritual Barometer

Deep within the understanding of the Lord's chosen people was this concept of shalom. Sometimes shalom was present; sometimes shalom was missing; sometimes shalom was a pretence. But always shalom was there in their consciousness, as a state to be desired and preserved and treasured.

It was also always there as a quiet spiritual barometer for them, indicating the true state of their relationship with the Lord God: "We have shalom? – then all is well for us under the Lord. We lack

shalom? – then we are getting something wrong under the Lord". Simple but effective!

"Eirene"

The closest New Testament equivalent is the Greek word "eirene" – peace. The Lord blessing His disciples, both before His death and resurrection (John 14.27) and afterwards (John 20.19,21,26), would have spoken in Aramaic – "Shalom I leave with you ... Shalom be unto you ...", translated into the Greek of the New Testament as "eirene".

Can we imagine something of the tremendous sweep of comfort those words would have bestowed upon His disciples, encompassing as they did the tumults of Calvary and the empty tomb? Before and after those extraordinary days, the Lord was quietly telling them – "Shalom, all is well, all shall be well". He was reassuring them, before the sights they were about to see of His dreadful suffering, "Despite what you shall see, your shalom is unaffected".

Extraordinary! Wonderful, and true.

Our Calling

Today it is Christian people like us who have the privilege of being within Christ's flock. We are the inheritors through Christ of all these old, rich blessings. We are the present-day inheritors of shalom. The Lord now gives *us* His peace, His shalom, His eirene.

It is His gift, to be received, acknowledged, and acted upon. Shalom is to make a daily difference in our lives.

Indeed it is stronger than that: we are not just given the *option* to dwell within shalom – we are given a downright *instruction* to dwell within it! For a shalom-less Christian is a contradiction, who is actually living in a way that is denying the great divine truths which have been revealed to us.

As God's faithful sheep, shalom is intended to be our possession, for us, for every moment of our lives. It is something we must *receive* on

the basis of the facts and promises just mentioned, and then *practise, practise!*

And, like so many features of our Christian walk, the more we practise shalom, the more we shall find ourselves dwelling naturally within its security. As this happens, the need for us deliberately to think about shalom and practise it gradually fades, for we steadily become, in our very beings, natural, instinctive "shalom-dwellers" – walking along through life in a place of great, unchanging, spiritual peace.

Think of a submarine deep below the surface of the sea. In those depths, the sea is always calm. The storms, the tossing waves – all are far above, elsewhere, leaving the boat in a place of perpetual, untouchable, calm, whatever may be happening elsewhere.

Henry Drummond, in his book "The Greatest Thing in the World", tells of a competition where the artists were each to paint a picture on the theme of "Peace". The winning painting showed a thundering waterfall with jagged rocks, roaring water, swirling spray, bubbling foam – not much peace there! But to one side, tucked close in by the torrent, was a bird on her nest, singing!

The Shalom Cocoon

As we walk with the Lord in this "shalom cocoon", we will be able to view, and cope with, whatever comes at us in life *from this state of untouchable shalom*. No wonder therefore that the Holy Spirit through Paul bellows at us that frankly, nothing at all, anywhere, at any time, is capable of separating us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"¹²!

The simple truth is that absolutely nothing that might occur in life - no circling wolf whatsoever who might be sniffing around the Flock seeking to make mischief - is capable of damaging the heart-deep covenant relationship that exists between the Father and each of His sheep. At the centre of that relationship is the Lord Jesus Christ

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¹² Based on Romans 8.38-39

Himself. Without Him there is no possible covenant between God and man, and hence no possibility of shalom.

It is only through Christ's work of mercy on that cross that we can receive Him into our lives by faith, along with the shalom which He brings. Truly He is the "great Shepherd of the sheep" 13.

The New Covenant

The wonder is that the "shalom-dweller" is able to dwell in this secret, deep-down place, untouched and untouchable by anything in the world. It is a state won at great cost, and freely given to each of Christ's sheep.

This precious state is for us, here, now, always. What a gift! What a privilege!

Not That Easy!

As we finish, let us be honest enough to admit that both our receiving this shalom into our lives, and then retaining it hour by hour, is often very difficult to achieve in the ups and downs of our busy lives. But nonetheless, shalom is *there!* – a gift, a goal, a treasure, a thanksgiving.

When we have wandered from it, as we so often do, we can return to the Lord's shalom gratefully, and restfully.

For the Lord, our gracious Good Shepherd, knows all too well that we are usually very *silly* sheep! – but yet we are precious to Him. He welcomes us back, He sorts us out, and He leads us on.

"Shalom be with you" are His quiet, steady words to Christian people like us – and He means it.

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¹³ Hebrews 13.20

Letter 3 In the Son-shine

Cleaning the Pond ...

One of my winter-time jobs in the garden is to clean out the pond. It is a job I never enjoy in prospect - so never quite get round to it for months – but then when I am finally doing it, it's actually quite fun and quite satisfying.

A central feature of the pond is a solar-powered fountain which, I must admit, I am rather proud of! From spring to autumn it floats in the middle of the pond amongst the lilies, and bursts into life whenever sunlight falls on to its solar panels. The grandchildren have much fun "turning it on and off" by putting their hands into and out of the line of the sun's rays so that the shadows of their hands fall on the panels and turn the power off.

That little fountain and its reaction to the sun's rays has things to teach us. So let's think about sunshine this time – a distant prospect for us in December probably, but all the more welcome for that! – and let's also think about Son-shine as well.

Now the sun is always shining - honestly it is, even though down here under the grey clouds it is hard to believe! You will perhaps have come across that amazing moment when your plane has taken off on a cloudy day and climbs steadily up through the clouds. Suddenly it bursts out above them: the sky above is a wonderful deep blue, the sunshine is glorious, the great carpet of bright white clouds stretches away below you to the horizon. That glory is there all the time, but down here we are not able to see it - the clouds get in the way.

The solar powered fountain in the pond is a tiny, ever-instant example of this. The water only bursts forth from the fountain when the sunlight actually falls upon the panels. Sometimes the fountain will run for several hours non-stop. At other times it is forever chopping

and changing, stopping and starting every few seconds – either because of passing clouds or passing grandchildren

The Son-shine

Now let us see where this takes us. The **Son** is always shining. His light, His rays, His warmth, His power, His love, His resources, His blessings – all His lovely qualities - spring forth constantly from Him. We think of such Scriptures as "I will never fail you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13.5, quoted from Deuteronomy 31.6), and "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13.8), amongst many others.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is utterly constant. He does not "chop and change", or "stop and start" – and as His redeemed disciples taking Him at His word, we know these things are true.

And what a difference that knowledge can make to us, and should make to us, in our daily walk with the Lord! It means we can tackle whatever life is throwing at us **from within the Son-shine**, with all that implies.

But wait a minute we say! Fine, the Son may be always shining on us, but what about the clouds that get in the way??! After all, it is the clouds which prevent the fountain in the pond from doing what it is designed to do. Surely therefore we may suffer from clouds which block us off from the Son, and so prevent us from doing what we are designed to do?

Real Clouds and False Ones ...

The answer to that one is – Yes and No! There are a couple of things we need to recognise about the clouds that can come between us and the Lord Jesus.

First, we need to admit that we for our part can sometimes be horribly effective in creating some clouds ourselves. These are the clouds of harboured, unconfessed sin. In their way, these clouds are real – indeed they are the only ones that **are** real - and they do have some effect.

They do not cause us to lose our salvation, but they do cause us to drop out of fellowship with the Lord. And we will remain in that state until there is repentance and confession, forgiveness and restoration.

We can think of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Their sin certainly created a cloud, causing them to be cut off from the Son-shine. They realised that suddenly things were not right, and they made pathetic attempts to avoid the consequences.

We can think of so many other Scriptural examples: Cain, Achan, Samson, Saul, David and Bathsheba, Solomon, Judas, Ananias and Sapphira, Saul of Tarsus. Yes, clearly our sins do create clouds, which serve to cut us off from fellowship with Almighty God.

But notice what God makes of these clouds Himself! In His grace, He always reaches through them, and He always disperses them once sin has been confessed and forgiven.

So if and when we feel conscious of sin-clouds we have built between the Lord and ourselves, we need only follow the old paths of confession for the Lord to melt those clouds quietly away. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness ..." (I John 1.9). The Sonshine will reach through once more, as we are restored to full fellowship with Him.

Secondly, let us be quite clear: there aren't actually any other sorts of cloud, ever! Unlike the rays of the sun, the rays of the Son always shine through, the sky is always clear.

You see we are always very quick to **imagine** clouds. These are the clouds of trials and difficulties and mishaps, of painful memories and broken dreams, and all the rest of them. Whenever life is not as we would wish, too easily we imagine that we are cut off from God by all these dreadful clouds besetting us.

But these are not real clouds at all! The fact is, while we are in fellowship with the Lord, nothing at all can ever affect that fellowship. Nothing.

This means that the receivers of the Son's rays - ordinary Christian people like us - are never cut off from Him. It means we can always be receiving His Son-shine and Son-light and Son-rays, whatever is happening, whatever the apparent clouds!!

Hasn't the Holy Spirit told us this through Paul? "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8.35). There then follows that well-known list of all the possible clouds we can think of. And their effect? Their ability to cut us off from the Son? Zilch! Nothing! Zero!

The plain truth is that absolutely NOTHING does cut us off, or CAN cut us off, from the divine Son-shine.

Why do we often forget this? Why do we rarely remember it? And why do we even more rarely ACT upon it?

The Effects of Constant Son-shine

The fact that Jesus is always shining has simple but profound effect.

His shining allows us, obliges us, and enables us, to be always bubbling as little fountains of praise by way of response in the midst of all that goes on within our lives. It is because of the constant Sonshine of the Lord Jesus, that we can be people welling up in thanks, in joy, in bubble, in beauty, in life!! – whatever is going on around us.

It is even more than that. When the sunlight falls on that fountain in the pond, it cannot help but respond – it just has to respond! And so with us: because we are always receiving, we too cannot help but respond by being people of instinctive praise.

Hence indeed, "This is the day that the Lord has made – we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118.24). And again, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, Rejoice!" (Philippians 4.4). Paul had come through to this point after years of hard, hard graft. Think of his life. Think of all the hardships and setbacks and dangers he endured for the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet here he is, battered, scarred, imprisoned, sidelined, urging us to rejoice! He writes of how he has learned to be

content, come what may (Philippians 4.11ff). He writes to the Thessalonians – "In everything give thanks" (I Thessalonians 5.18). Paul has been shown by the Holy Spirit, through sheer, hard experience, that there is never any reason at all for a Christian to cease from praising the Lord. To return to our fountain-in-the-pond picture: the Son-shine is always being received, be it by Paul or by us, so the fountains that are Paul or us are always responding.

Let's draw to a close with a final practical point.

It is all very well to realise that there is never actually any reason for us not to be receiving from the Lord, and hence for us not to be responding with praise in our lives.

But we have to admit that there are many times when we're not quite bubbling! Life can often be pretty grim, can't it? — and in such times, the notion of praising God can seem very difficult, even to the point of being some sort of unkind joke.

Yet it is in these very tough times that the reality of the Son-shine can have the greatest effect on us.

When we are confronted with circumstances which we take to be great dark clouds, we are bidden by the Lord to remember that they are NOT great dark clouds as far as He is concerned. He does not "do" great dark clouds in that sense; for Him, they simply do not exist.

As we remember this truth, that His Son-shine reaches us come what may, we are given tremendous comfort, and a real sense of purpose and perspective to get cracking with whatever confronts us. A problem, a worry, a fear? "The Son is shining, right here, right now, over this situation, over me, over us all. So let's take it from there!"

If the Lord sees no clouds, why on earth should we? And indeed, if we go on insisting that they **are** clouds, whatever He thinks, aren't we starting to go seriously wrong? – forgetting that **His** perspective is the true one, and not ours.

So we've seen that the only real clouds which can get in the way are clouds which we make ourselves, the clouds of sinfulness. These **can**

put us out of fellowship for a time; we become conscious of our being out of step with the Lord. By God's grace, as we return to Him in repentance and confession, these clouds are quickly dispersed.

No other real clouds exist, to block us off from the Son-shine. Even the ones we think are horribly real are BOGUS! - "**nothing** shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord ..." (Romans 8.35-39).

So let us take heart! We can respond to whatever is going in our lives **from always within the Son-shine.** For the Lord gives the Son-shine – there is "no shadow of turning" with Him. It is our privilege to respond as Christ's faithful sheep, with worship and service and praise!

Letter 4 Life is Now

"Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1.2).

For many of us the holidays have ended and the autumn programme is starting up once more - meaning new teachers for the children, new activities at church, and so on.

Often the prospect of starting back is not very appealing! "If only the holidays could carry on I hope my kids settle OK into their new classesI hope my new boss doesn't get too hyper". Looking ahead and worrying is a common enough habit which doesn't always do us much good!

What does the Lord have to say on this one? "Take therefore no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matthew 6.34).

Jesus points us away from concerns which do not really matter *today* towards the concerns which really do matter *today*. Our future worries are not to be any "big deal" - for our heavenly Father knows our needs, and will supply them *as and when we need* (Matthew 6 vv 30, 32, 33). What is far more important for us is the "seeking first of the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (v 33). That is the "now" job. That is the job which truly matters *today*.

See how much the Lord's emphasis is always on Now! He does not want us fussing about either the past or the future – for therein lies distraction from the task in hand, the task of Now.

He provides His children with a beautiful place of trust – of trust in the goodness of the God of Now – and He bids us dwell in this place. As we do that, we will come to know, from blessed experience, that

when the Future becomes the Present, the Lord will be just as much our gracious, provident Lord **then** as He is **now**, **here**, **today**.

Let us see one or two examples of how this works.

For a start, the Lord has built this lesson into the very way in which He has created us. Our whole bodies have constant, very short-term needs. We depend on breathing, moment by moment. We need food and water. We simply cannot store up in our bodies today a month's provision of air, food and water! - in case there is no air, food or water in a few weeks' time. No. In these matters, as in everything else, the Lord insists that we trust Him for Now.

"Give us this day our daily bread".

Now we can turn to two lovely examples from Scripture.

Manna

The first concerns the Lord giving manna to the children of Israel in the wilderness (See Exodus Chapter 16.9-31) The people were given very strict instructions about the manna. Each household was to collect for their own needs (vv 17-18). They were only to collect enough for that day - no manna was to be kept until the next morning (vv 19-21). The only exception to that rule involved their collection on the sixth day of the week (vv 22-26). On this sixth day they were to collect enough for two days – thus allowing the Sabbath rest – and the manna kept over for the Sabbath "did not stink" (v 24).

Now consider just what these rules taught the people about the "nowness" of God. Each morning before their eyes lay the manna – God's gracious provision for them *for that day*. But there was far more than they needed! Imagine you were one of the collectors – what is the greatest difficulty of all for you? Isn't it this? – *not* to fill up every bag and pocket you possess with as much manna as you can carry?! It's like when you go blackberrying – there are always a few more to pick and put in the box!

But the Lord had said 'No' to this – they were only to take enough for their needs for that day. This meant that, quite deliberately and

obediently, they had to turn aside from the manna stretched out before them, and leave it – and trust in the Lord that He would provide again tomorrow!

Could you or I do that, I wonder? The Lord **insisted** that the Israelites did this, because they simply had to learn the lesson that they were **to put their trust in the God of Now!**

"He has generously provided enough for today. I am to trust today that He will similarly provide generously tomorrow. And I must demonstrate that trust by walking away from some of His provision for today".

This is still a simple, vital, precious truth for God's faithful sheep of today. "I have enough for today? – then fine, enough is enough, and I will leave tomorrow until it is today".

Cherith

And now let us move to dear Elijah, in fear for his life as King Ahab's search parties scour the land to find him (I Kings 17.1-7).

The Lord has told Elijah to go and hide over in the land of Gilead, beside the little brook Cherith – and see what happens next!

Elijah is to drink from the brook – and to trust in the ravens to bring him his food! Just think about that: Elijah peering up into the sky, hoping that the ravens will come once more delivering his supper. Did he ever quietly wonder to himself: "- and if they don't?"

They always did – for the God of Now will always provide for Now, when Now is Now! But the Lord was still teaching this lesson to Elijah – verse 7. "And it came to pass, after a while, that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land".

The brook was drying up because there was no rain, and there was no rain because of Elijah's own words to Ahab uttered under the authority of God (v 1). Elijah sees what is happening to that little brook, day by day by day. Wouldn't you have started wondering? —

making plans, deciding what to do when the brook dries up? I know I would have done!

But Elijah stays put. He trusts. He knows he is in God's hands. So he just waits for the Lord's new word. What an example for us all about what it means to trust in the God of Now for the needs of Now!

The Israelites had to trust that the Lord would provide again tomorrow – by turning away from the plenty He had given today. Elijah had to trust that the Lord would provide again tomorrow – by gazing at a dwindling stream and an empty sky.

"My times are in thy hand" (Psalm 31.15). Yes. David's simple realisation sums up this vital truth of the "now-ness" of God, and the now-ness of our grateful dependence upon Him.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ..." (Romans 8.35). The answer? Nobody, and nothing! And neither now, nor ever!

A new teacher? An unknown boss? A worry about health or money or whatever? "Sufficient unto the day".

Do you find that any of tomorrow's concerns are on your mind today? Of course we have to be mindful of the future sometimes, especially if we have God-given responsibilities towards others. But this is never to be at the cost of living aright under the Lord right here, right now.

If a future concern has a right to your attention today, because you have to do something about it, then fair enough – do what has to be done!

Then give the whole bag-full of future concerns back to the Lord, where they belong. Do this simply and thankfully, and then turn back to today. For **God is**, right here, right now, to be worshipped, loved and served.

He never intended for us to stagger along under a great burden of worry about the future. So why do we do it? "Sufficient unto the day".

We can sum all this up quite simply: God is Now; life is now; dependence is now; thankfulness is now. And all these truths will still be truths when **Tomorrow** has become **Today**.

Letter 5 Selfless Service

Let us start this Letter with a greeting from Jude 2 – "Mercy unto you, and peace, and love, be multiplied".

In January 1912, Captain Scott and his companions reached the South Pole. Scott's diary tells of their utter despondency when, after all those hundreds of miles of sledge-pulling across the Antarctic wilderness, they looked up from their efforts and saw away in the distance a tiny flapping flag. That flag said it all – Amundsen had got there first.

The end of their journey was one of deep gloom. There is that famous photograph of the five men standing in a line in the snow at the South Pole. Dreams had been broken, hopes had been dashed – and ahead of them lay an 800-mile trek back to the north, in terrible weather, with time running strongly against them.

We can draw some timely spiritual lessons from this famous story of five brave men, as we enter this New Year, for, like them, the country is facing in one sense a long and difficult journey in the months ahead.

Destination

Captain Robert Scott had noble aspirations – he wanted to lead the first expedition to reach the South Pole, and so bring glory to the British Empire.

His destination was a bleak, unmarked point in an icy wilderness! To get there took years of planning, fund-raising and stupendous human effort and courage.

Yet our destination is such a wonderful contrast! We are going to the King, to His palace, through those gates of pearly splendour! We shall see the Lord. We shall see all the saints who have gone before

us – the great figures of the Bible and of the Church. We shall see those whom we have loved, and who have loved us, who are gone before us in the pathways of Christ.

What joy! What hope! What tears; what laughter; what reminiscence; what glory. This is our God-given destiny. This is where we are going.

Let us always be bi-focal Christians – thoroughly involved in the hereand-now of today, but always looking up, away, beyond, to our real home, to that house with many mansions.

No wonder we are "lost in wonder, love and praise"!

Fellowship

Scott and his companions were nothing if not a very close-knit team. Their very lives depended on each other. They were thrown together in conditions unspeakably harsh and unpleasant.

Life was made worse for them by Scott's well-meant decision to go on to the Pole with five men rather than four. This was so that the Merchant Navy would have a representative at the Pole as well as the Royal Navy.

But all the planning had been for just four men – the tent, the sleeping bag, the rations, the fuel, the skis, the sledges. Can we begin to imagine just what life was like in that tent? It would have been bad enough with four of them, but now there was a fifth! And that fifth man, Evans, was a great bear of a man, chosen to go on with them because of his massive strength of body and heart!

Those five men learned pretty quickly about patience, tolerance, biting the lip, giving way, putting up with, spreading good cheer, and doggedly giving of their own best in appalling conditions.

Doesn't that give us a very-close-to-home picture of how we are to be within the Church?!

Self First!

The next lesson we can take from Scott and his companions looks at first sight like a very bad mistake – we must see to ourselves first.

Every morning those five men would wake up around 4 am in their cramped tent, after a few hours of sleep. But it then took them hours before they could set off once more, dragging their sledges ever onward towards the south.

And in those hours, each man had to see to himself first.

It was only when each individual had seen to all his own personal jobs that he was in a position to serve the interests of the group. It would have been no good for Birdie Bowers or Titus Oates or whoever to say, "Sorry chaps, I can't give a hand with the sledge just yet, I've not had my breakfast". He *ought* to have had his breakfast! — for it was only then that he would be freed up to play his part in the group.

Just so with our own Christian service in these difficult times. We need "to have had our breakfast", quickly and promptly. We need to have got our own "act together" without any fuss or nuisance to others.

By that we simply mean we have got ourselves spiritually on track and set for the day. We receive the Lord afresh into our lives through our two-way prayers in the context of His holy Word. No such receiving means "Not had breakfast yet – so I can't help to pull that sledge"!

Selfless Service

The other side of the Self First coin is Selfless Service. It is as we seek to keep ourselves spiritually healthy, that we can then, and only then, properly fulfil our responsibilities of giving our love to the Lord God and to our neighbours.

How Scott and his companions did give that selfless service to one another!

On the return journey from the Pole, the fifth man, Evans, began to falter. His sheer size meant that, of them all, he was the first to suffer from the appalling conditions and short rations.

He fell and banged his head; he began to hallucinate, crying out at night and keeping them all awake. Worst of all, during the increasingly desperate march of each day, he began to fall behind, further and further. That meant they all had to stop and stand in the freezing conditions. Two of them had to return for perhaps a mile, and drag him forwards back into the group: more time wasted, more energy expended.

No wonder Scott in his diary began to wrestle with the awful question: what was to be done about poor Evans? Mercifully the question was answered for them, with Evans dying quietly in their midst.

During all this, Dr. Edward Wilson, the one civilian of the group, still kept picking up stones along the way, recording them in his notebooks, and placing them on the sledge. Here was more weight, more delay – but it was also more of the vital geological evidence which he had been brought on the expedition to gather. You would have thought he would reach the point of thinking – "Never mind the wretched stones, what about my poor toes?" – but he didn't. Those stones are now in the Geological Museum in London – a mute example of amazing selfless service.

We can also mention possibly the supreme act of selfless service on that expedition: Titus Oates, suffering from dreadful frostbite and conscious that he was the one now holding the rest of them back, going out of that tent into the darkness and blizzard - "I'm just going outside – I may be some time".

"Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15.13).

The Lord did just that literally, for us all. Oates did that, literally, for his companions. As the Lord's faithful sheep, we are all called to do just that, figuratively, for the Lord and for one another.

Acceptance

The final days for Scott, Wilson and Bowers in their tent were days of quiet acceptance, of great dignity, and days which had something about them even of Gethsemane.

The men were just 11 miles from safety and plenty at One Ton Depot – a distance they could have managed in one day given fine weather and a following wind. Yet the blizzard raged outside, and they were totally helpless.

There is no anger in Scott's diary. His writing gradually deteriorates, the entries become sporadic; his last words — "For God's sake, look after our people".

The very top of their tent, just a foot or so above the gathered snows of the winter, was found by the rescue party some months later. They collapsed the tent over the bodies of their three companions, said their prayers, erected a simple cross, and came away, leaving in the snowy wilderness a "grave that kings would envy".

Jesus Christ IS Lord

This old story of fine, brave men, tragic as it is, still stirs the heart and reminds us of so many spiritual lessons. We enter this New Year, perhaps a bit weary and unsure of what lies ahead, but buoyed up with the great Christian truths into which we have been drawn by God's pure grace.

More loving Christian service than ever is going to be required in the coming days, both close to home and further afield. There will be all manner of needs. Come what may, our responsibility is *to be there*, as steady Christian people, as faithful Christian sheep.

A timely word, or a lengthy conversation; a little gift, or a simple meal; a cheery smile, or a hug amidst the tears. These are just some of the old, small, obvious ways in which we make a difference, in which the reality of the love of God in the Lord Jesus Christ is expressed in the here and now.

Along the way we can give a thought to those lessons from Captain Scott: our destination; the essence of fellowship; a rightly-understood "self first"; selfless service under the Lord for one another; and a quiet acceptance that the Lord's will shall be done.

For Jesus Christ IS Lord. All is well. All shall be well. We praise Him.

Letter 6 Contentment

Contentment

"For I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be content" (Philippians 4.11b).

Are you content? Am I? Are the people amongst whom we live content?

These words come from a passage where Paul is thanking the Christians at Philippi for the support they have recently given him. He not only thanks them, but also praises them (v 14) that in their very act of kindness towards him they have done well; that is, by this simply act of generosity they have pleased God by bearing fruit (v 17) – they have stored up some "treasure in heaven".

But he also emphasises (v 11a) that he was not actually in a position of want or need, for he has learned to be "content". The Greek word he uses (" $\alpha u \tau \alpha \rho \kappa \eta \varsigma$ ", autark-es) certainly involves contentment, but also covers the ideas of "enough", and "sufficiency".

So he is telling his fellow Christians that he has learned to be content, to dwell within a sense of "enough-ness" and sufficiency, *come what may in the outward circumstances of his life.*

A Precious Lesson

Herein lies a very precious lesson from the Holy Spirit for us all.

First we note that Paul has had to *learn* this ability to be content (Philippians 4.11). Through rough, tough daily experience – and he had more of that than most of us! – he gradually has had it drummed into him that his outward circumstances have nothing to do with the inner, unchanging realities of his existence.

Indeed **nothing external** was capable of disturbing the rock-solid inner truths on which his life was based.

We think immediately at this point of the Romans 8 texts. "If God be for us, who can be against us? ... Who shall lay any thing against God's elect? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8. vv 31, 33, 35). These Holy Spirit-inspired words are pouring forth from a man who has proved the truth of these words, time and time again. He simply knows that, come what may, all really is well!

The Lord Jesus Christ

And on what is this knowledge based? It is based on Paul's faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, on his total assurance that in Christ he has found the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Paul is thus able to trust God His Father totally, constantly, unquestioningly. Whatever befalls him makes not the slightest difference to what really matters. Hence, yes indeed, he is able to be content.

Scriptural Precedents

And Paul is simply the latest in a long scriptural line of individuals who learned and practised this same truth, for it applies to anyone who humbly seeks to walk with God.

So we can think of Noah. He too had to learn to be content, come what may, be it from the Lord God, or from the windows of heaven or the fountains of the great deep! (Genesis 6-9)

We think of Abraham on Mount Moriah, raising that knife to sacrifice Isaac his beloved and long-awaited son (Genesis 22). Here is a man with zero understanding of what is going on, but somehow within the turmoil there is a contentment that God must know what He is doing, and therefore, once again, all shall be well.

Time and again in the life and ministry of Moses we see the same principle. Moses learns to trust, and in the learning of that lesson, he

learns also that he can be content. The problems coming at him from left, right and centre are not actually his problems — they are the Lord's problems, and the Lord is amply able to deal with them!

Hence Moses' instinctive reaction, when faced with the incessant murmurings of the people, is to go straight to the Lord in prayer: "Lord – here they go again – this is what they are moaning about – please have mercy and get it sorted" (See for example Exodus 17.4 ff, and many similar occasions).

Think of all of the prophets. These faithful, godly men were often given extremely dangerous tasks to carry out, which they duly did. They knew they faced danger, rejection, ridicule, imprisonment, perhaps even death – but there is always to be found about these great men of God this same contentment, this assurance, this settledness. They knew they were carrying out His wishes – so what more could anyone ask for?

Let us consider the life of the Lord Himself – the supreme scriptural example of "contentment". Jesus always knew He was totally in step with His heavenly Father. His was a life of full, loving obedience, and hence of complete contentment. Jesus knew what was going to be asked of Him, but could face those horrors from this bedrock of contentment – the knowledge that in His heavenly Father all would be well.

But then came that awful cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me?" (Mark 15.34). We can never hope to comprehend the utter horror of those moments, as for the first time Jesus really was truly severed from His Father. His inner peace and contentment were shattered - and all for the sake of people like us.

And yet even here in that scene of total dreadfulness, God the Father wrought His precious victories. Even here on that tree of Golgotha, we can now see that God knew what He was doing, that this is the way things had to be, and that indeed, yet again, all is well!

A Fruit

So we can see that contentment is a fruit, a consequence, an effect. It grows naturally in the life of any believer who humbly, honestly, steadily, wants to walk with God in their lives. It is akin to the old Hebrew concept of "shalom" — peace, rest, assurance, an untouchable well-being, and as such, it is deeply precious!

And this contentment leads us into praise and thankfulness and joy before the Lord, for all that He is, and for all that He has done.

When I am not content ...

Now let us be honest enough to admit that there are times when contentment seems a million miles away – when life is just serving up stress and unpleasantness. It happens, doesn't it?

We must learn the lessons from Scripture, that hassle is normal for the Christian – but no hassle is able to destroy our inner contentment!

So - "Take it to the Lord in prayer" – whatever it is, and sincerely wait on Him for His leading, remembering His promise that **nothing** shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And rehearse the inner realities. Remind yourself of who God is, and what He has promised, about Himself, and you, and the rest of us.

Just remember all the blessings which are yours, right here, right now, in Christ – not one of them deserved, but all of them freely given by the God who loves us.

Do these things, and it won't be long before you are rediscovering that inner contentment, and praising God once again!

Keep serving!

Finally a note of caution: I regret to have to point out that this contentment is no licence for laziness! The fact that "I have learned to be content" does not give me permission to sit on my backside for the rest of my days and let the world go by! There is still work to be done,

goals to be set and achieved under the Lord, and a Gospel to be lived out and proclaimed in a needy world.

Yes, Paul had learned to be content, but he continued to work harder than any of us in the Lord's service!

So at the start of 2008, despite the swirling storm clouds, let us remember that we can be, and should be, **content.**

For, as Julian of Norwich so rightly put it, it is a simple, true fact, that in the Lord Jesus Christ, "all is well, and all is well, and all manner of things shall be well".

We praise Him.

Letter 7 The Day of Small Things

I wonder how you react to repetitive routine in your life?

Are you the sort of person who is comfortable with a steady daily rhythm of activity? Or perhaps your instinct is to kick against such routine and rhythm, seeing these as boring, or getting in the way of what you really want to be and to achieve?

We are all conscious of the passing of time, day by day, month by month, year by year, and it really does seem that "time flies" these days faster than ever! As we get older, it is so easy to gaze back over the years and to dwell on mistakes or lost opportunities, and also to look on our current lives and wonder if we are getting things right.

How important it is therefore that each of us feels content with what our lives consist of, in terms of how we spend our time, energy and money, and in terms of what we feel we are actually achieving.

The Day of Small Things

There is that lovely little phrase in Zechariah 4.10, in which the Lord is speaking to His servant Zechariah during the exile in Babylon.

The Lord explains that His servant Zerubbabel has already laid the foundation of the temple back in Jerusalem, and He assures Zechariah that Zerubbabel will also finish the building – a real encouragement to the people of Israel that their exile would soon come to an end.

But then He says (v 10) – "For who hath despised the day of small things?". The laying of a foundation stone could easily have been dismissed as being of no importance, an act that was minor, irrelevant, small. Yet in the Lord's sight, that foundation stone had immense significance, and He was keen that Zechariah should explain its significance to the people.

Yes, in one sense it did constitute merely "a day of small things", but in the wisdom of God even that small act *deeply mattered!*

We are given here a very precious spiritual principle – that "the day of small things" matters, even if the small things of such a day really are small, and remain small! For it reminds us that life is to be lived, even moment by moment, in grateful, ordinary, humble communion with the Lord. For that is what life IS, no more, no less.

The Lord wants to find His people *faithful* when He returns. Some of His people will be highly gifted, famous, in the public eye, achieving grand things on a grand scale. But most will not be like that. Instead they will be quietly getting on with their God-given responsibilities, in a contented rhythm day by day.

The Greatest

"Who is the greatest?" the disciples asked the Lord. He brought a little child into their midst. "This one. Be like this one".

Who did the Lord notice in the pushing crowds in the temple that day? – the widow with her tuppence! The days of that dear soul were all days of small things, and yet there she is, praised by the Lord and given to us all as a right example. And notice also that she never even knew He had seen her; she didn't even know that she was so precious in the Lord's sight. She would have quietly gone on her way, back into her day of small things, not giving a second thought to her tiny gift in the temple.

The Blessed

Who are the blessed ones? The proud, the successful, the wealthy, the influential? Not a bit of it! No. Blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, the ones who mourn, who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who are merciful and pure in heart, and are seekers after peace. Most of these lives will know all about those "days of small things", and be content within them.

Andrew

Think of Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. Andrew knew about days of small things, as he watched his brother become one of the key leaders amongst the Twelve.

It was always Peter who was included within the inner circle around the Lord, while Andrew, who had introduced his brother to Jesus in the first place (John 1.35-42), was left behind with the others.

Not easy! But Andrew just got quietly on with the tasks of each day, learning to be content with his path and his place.

Ananias

Remember Ananias in Damascus. Here was another quiet faithful one, getting steadily on with his life and minding his own business during the days of small things.

But one day he was required to live a day of one Enormous Thing – to go and greet the dreaded Saul of Tarsus *as a brother*, and to be used for the restoring of his sight and for his baptism. There he was, ready, alert, willing, obedient, gracious. Then he disappears again, back into those days of small things.

We come across this same principle, centuries later, in the daily log of Christopher Columbus on his great voyage further and further west across the Atlantic. The most frequent entry just says — "Today, we sailed on". Today, we carried on doing what is to be done, and that is all there is to be said!

Liturgy

In our worship we are also bidden to live usually within what comes down to "days of small things".

For liturgy itself is all about rhythm and routine. Therein lies comfort, familiarity, balance, breadth, and yet, as we all find at times, the very routine of liturgy means we can easily switch off, dismissing it as boring or as "doing nothing for me".

Within the liturgical seasons of the Christian year, variety of theme and mood are built in, with occasional Feast days of "great things" interspersed with the many days of "small things" in between.

So liturgy seeks to find a right balance, between rhythm and novelty, between small things and great things. For both have their place: liturgy alone is dead; novelty alone quickly becomes dead.

In recent years there has been a strong trend across the denominations away from liturgy towards what we can term "novelty". Everything must be new, different, exciting, involving, intriguing, while all the time still catering successfully for all spiritual and physical age groups at once!

"All Age Worship" has been the great cry! Can it be done? – week by week, month by month, year by year? Can a new spiritual rabbit be pulled from the hat every single week, to keep people interested and to keep them attending? Should we even be trying to do this? Is such an approach to worship scriptural, and does it produce strong, growing, balanced faithful sheep?

Patience and Contentment

Be it in matters of worship or of other concerns within our lives, does it not come down to a question of our needing to be patient and content with "days of small things"?

Life is not intended to be a laugh a minute, or a surprise at church every Sunday, a constant rush from one breathless excitement to the next.

It never has been like that, and to seek such a life is to be on a very frustrating journey! For such a seeker cannot help but be discontent when having to live through those many "days of small things".

Such days matter. They are not an exception, but the norm. They are not to be resented, but welcomed. It is in such days, when we simply "sail on", that the great spiritual qualities of the Christian life are

gradually formed within us – endurance, character, hope, as well as the "fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5.22-23).

The small things really are small things! – a smile, a chat with a neighbour, saying sorry, giving way on the roads, picking up some litter, saying our prayers, encouraging someone: nothing very special or unusual there, but in such ways we walk our Christian walk.

Trafalgar

A few hours before the Battle of Trafalgar, the captains of the ships in Nelson's great fleet were summoned over to Victory for Nelson to outline his plan for the battle the following day.

It was a novel plan, whereby the English fleet would slice through the French and Spanish battle lines at right angles in two parallel columns. It had never been done before.

Having explained the plan and answered their questions, Nelson finished with words to the effect, "In the heat of battle, if you can't see where you are in the overall scheme of things, just put your ship alongside that of an enemy, and get on with it!"

Mercifully, we are not involved in bloody battles, but the advice still holds good for those seeking to be faithful sheep. Never mind that we can not always see the grand plan. Never mind that we are not always on a great spiritual high. Do the obvious, keep to the basics, and be content with the day of small things.

Occasional days of great things are wonderful, and often can be keenly anticipated, but meanwhile, equally wonderful can be *this* day, and *each* day, of small things.

Letter 8 A Starvation of Stillness

We hope you are all in good heart, with signs of spring all around us and Easter coming into view.

Super-Abundance

We are living in an age of great plenty for many people. When you are next in your local supermarket, just consider afresh the sheer abundance of all the food products on offer, as you wander up and down all the aisles: exotic fruit and vegetables from all over the world at any time of the year; ten varieties of bottled water; alcohol in every conceivable form; fifteen varieties of coffee; cheeses, fish, ready meals, biscuits, cereals, snacks – and so it goes on! "We have never had it so good" as the saying goes.

Starvation

Yet in the midst of all this outward abundance, there is also crippling starvation, for the great majority of people, perhaps including us.

This is a starvation of stillness and silence.

Now these two, while closely related, are not quite the same. We can have stillness without silence, and we can have silence without stillness. But each finds its proper fullness only in the company of the other.

We have so many helpful gadgets around us these days, each one designed to make our lives easier or more fulfilling. Cars, televisions, mobile phones, dvds, laptops, radios, mp3 players – all amazing in their way, all beneficial when properly used, and all tending to *starve* us of stillness and silence!

It is so easy to put on the radio, television or a CD, or to reach immediately for the newspaper or a magazine, without a second thought. Now there is nothing *wrong* with any of these activities in themselves, but you can see how each of them, by their very

presence, kills off stillness and silence. It is often so difficult simply to *stop*, and become *still* and *silent*.

Dependence

But our spiritual lives depend on such stillness and silence. It is only when we are *within* silence that we can become still enough to stop and listen, and the Holy Spirit can find us receptive enough to heed His still, small voice.

Surrounded as we are by this starvation of silence, it is no wonder that the lives of so many people around us are spiritually withered.

So how are you doing in terms of regular, personal stillness and silence?

"When you pray", the Lord tells us, "enter into your room and, shutting the door, pray to your Father in secret" (Matthew 6.6, J P Green Literal Version).

This is all about privacy, a stillness before the Lord, a solitude with the Lord, a freedom from the fear of being interrupted or overheard. Such a place, and such a habit, are both vital for our spiritual health and growth.

The "Quiet Time"

This brings us to the old "Quiet Time" of evangelical spirituality, and the need for this time, set aside to be with the Lord, is probably greater than ever these days, in view of the hectic pace of life.

You probably know of the reply of John Wesley, when he was asked about his prayer habits. "I always pray for two hours at the start of every day, unless I am very busy — in which case I pray for four hours".

He had it right! All too easily, as the pressures mount in our lives, the first habit to be squeezed out is the habit of regular, prayerful stillness.

Jesus' Example

On the eve of His selection of His twelve key disciples, Jesus spent the whole night in prayer (Luke 6.12).

We are mistaken if we think from this example that Jesus must have been *talking* the whole night through! Of course not. Yes, He spent the night in prayer, but for much of the time He was probably in complete silence and stillness in the conscious presence of his Father.

The whole occasion was one of deep, unhurried, spiritual exchange between Father and Son, free from being interrupted or overheard.

A Higher Spiritual Plane

So we see it is best that our prayer times should consist in only a small part of **us** doing the talking. A far higher plane of spiritual understanding is reached when **the Lord** is doing the talking, and we, for once, are doing the listening!

Reading His Word and saying our prayers are two precious habits, but both should also serve to usher us on to that higher plane of our being consciously in the very presence of the living God.

It is when we are there, that we instinctively fall still and silent, as we glimpse afresh something of the sheer enormity and holiness of God.

"Speak, Lord for thy servant heareth", were the words uttered by young Samuel (I Samuel 3.9). Old Eli finally realised what was going on, and had the sense to advise the boy what to do – namely, nothing – and what to say – namely, very little!

It was only because of Samuel's stillness and silence – a lesson he had to learn – that he was able to receive what the Lord was saying.

Crossing the Threshold

We do well, as those seeking to be the Lord's faithful sheep, to be well-practised in our consciously "crossing the threshold" into the presence of the Lord.

Now clearly we are always in the presence of the Lord, and there are no doubt many times during the day when we have a "quick word" with Him. That is all to the good.

But this crossing the threshold is rather different. Think of Moses entering the "Holy of Holies" to encounter the living God, (for example Exodus 25.22). This was a very deliberate act. Quite literally by divine command, he was consciously coming before *the God of utter holiness*. There would be nothing slapdash about Moses' appearance or manner on such occasions – stillness and silence were very much the "Order of the Day"!

A Friend of God

It was because Moses learned the correct attitude towards God, that God was able to use him so mightily in His purposes.

How lovely it is to read a little later on, (Exodus 33.11), how God spoke to Moses "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend". This beautiful relationship was all based on the sheer grace of God, and was kept intact through thick and thin by Moses' habit of stillness and silence in the presence of the Lord.

A Spiritual Check-Up

As we approach Good Friday and Easter Sunday, you might care to ensure that your own spiritual habits, of regularly crossing the threshold into the silence and stillness of God's presence, are in good shape.

And if they are not, then, by God's grace and enabling, you know what to do!

Letter 9 All About ... ME!

I am sure you know what it's like when, for no apparent reason, you seem to keep finding the same little niggle in your mind over the weeks? You don't go looking for it, but there it is, needing your attention, time after time.

There's no real rhyme or reason for it to be there — it just happens. It's as if the Lord is quietly tapping you on the shoulder with a steady "Ahem!" in your ear! Well, I've been experiencing a bit of that just lately.

It all started with some songs we were singing to the Lord in church a few Sundays ago. I was struck by two recurring emphases within them, both of which I have kept coming across since then at different times.

The "All-About-Me" Syndrome

The first emphasis was on "**me**"! Now there's nothing very wrong or unusual about mentioning "me" or "us" in hymns and songs of worship, for after all, as God's children we are in relationship with our heavenly Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. It would be very odd if we never mentioned anything about me or us as we express that relationship, both to Him and to one another, in our worship. And, when "me" and "us" come in their true place in the sequence, then all is well and good.

But this sort of "me"-mentioning really grated on this occasion! The songs we were singing were full of praise and worship to the Lord, but the reasons **why** we were giving Him such praise and worship had all the wrong focus. For we were singing that we love Him first and foremost **because of what He has done for us.**

Now think about that! Yes indeed, again this is quite true in its own place – part of our love for Him *is* certainly out of gratitude towards Him because of His love shown to us. But the overall effect of our words that morning was along the lines of – "You are great, Lord,

because You have done this, that and the other for me". Very subtly, and with no intention, the focus of our attention in worship was actually on **us, and not on Him**.

Some of the words even smacked of **me** doing the Lord a tremendous favour in giving Him praise, and that He is really a very fortunate Fellow as a result! "I'm giving you my life, Lord, because of all the good things you've done for me". Wow – He's never had it so good has He??!!

Now for courtesy's sake I'm not going to mention real examples of such dodgy wording in some of our current songs of worship, but I'm sure with your eyes open to such a possibility you will be able to spot examples in your own church, and soon.

Charismatic Channels

The reason for this subtle but mistaken emphasis is not hard to spot. So many of the newer songs currently used in our worship, whatever the denomination, have come to us through charismatic channels, as represented by such gatherings as Spring Harvest, New Wine and the whole "House Church" movement itself.

Now it is clear that in many ways such gatherings and movements have been used by the Lord, to bring deep blessing to many Christians over the decades. But like all human activity, they do have their risks, they do have their weaknesses, and they do have their tares among the wheat.

One such tare, amongst the good wheat, has been the tendency to over-emphasise the role and importance of "me" in the divine scheme of things. Of course, through God's amazing grace, I am deemed to be incredibly important in His sight. But in the realisation of that wonderful truth, it is so horribly easy to linger on **me** rather than on **Him!** And in that lingering, despite saying all the right things to Him about my love and gratitude and worship, I am actually still thinking about **ME!!** "He's done this for me, He's done that for me, so isn't He great?".

The REAL reason for worshipping God

The basic truth about our worship of Almighty God is simply this. We are not to worship Him primarily because of all the kindness He has given to us — extraordinary though that kindness is. We are to worship Him first and foremost FOR WHO HE IS!

We can put this great truth another way: We are to worship God for **His Being-ness**, **before** we worship God for **His Doing-ness**.

Strictly speaking, His Being-ness has nothing to do with us. Remembering that simple truth is no bad thing, for it keeps us firmly in our place, which, in comparison with this great God, is a very, very small place!

The plain fact is: He is God. It is that plain fact alone which makes Him worthy of all our praise.

As it happens, His Being-ness has led Him on into His Doing-ness, because of the sort of Being that He is. It is because of His gracious Doing-ness that we do become involved, humbly and gratefully. What He has done for us is glorious, but is, in this very important sense, always *secondary*.

If we are in the habit of praising Him primarily because of what He has done for us, we are in danger, unintentionally, of keeping us in the centre, and Almighty God on the fringe.

So we do well to check in our hymns and songs that the primary reason **why** we worship God is always kept crystal-clear. Any hymn or song we sing needs to uphold this vital truth - that we worship God for who He is, **before** we worship Him for what He has done for us. That keeps **Him** in the centre, and **us** on the fringe.

Here's a sample from a newer song of worship which gets this principle absolutely right! —

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, Who was, and is, and is to come – Lift up your voice with sound of singing

Lift up your hearts with songs of praise For He is worthy to be praised ..."

Quite so and quite right!

"My" God – "Our" God

Let us now come on to a close relative of this "all-about-mesyndrome". It is this: the fashion to speak of God as "my God", or as "our God".

"Our God reigns!" – one song I will mention as an example – has become well-established since its birth thirty or so years ago. And in a sense, yes, that's fine, there's is nothing wrong with that, for thankfully it is quite true. But again, look at the emphasis. He's OUR God – and He reigns.

How much stronger, nobler, truer, it would be to sing GOD REIGNS!!

For He is GOD! He is GOD! He is God BEFORE anything to do with us, and QUITE APART from anything to do with us!

"I AM THAT I AM". That's it. That says it all. That confronts us with His Being-ness. There is nothing more to be said, and in a sense there is nothing more that **can** be said or **should** be said.

Anything that we might say when exposed to this Ultimate Truth is going to be merely silly, akin to Peter's blathering at the Transfiguration about building booths (Matthew 17. 1-8). What a deeply foolish thing that was to say! Dear Peter, trying so hard as always to get it right, gets it completely, annoyingly, distractingly, foolishly, wrong! Oh Peter, just shut up!

Do you see how, as we stumble again into this central truth, the whole tone of our worship changes? For at the very heart of our worship we are led, wonderingly, further and further into a place of **deep, utter silence,** as we are shown, in all our foolish, blotchy sinfulness, something more of the very nature of God.

Moses' face shone with God's glory – the people could not even look at him (Exodus 34.35). No mention here of the people saying "We'll go along with you Lord, because you're a good God to us". How impertinent that would have been! No, they were terrified – and they were meant to be! For God was showing them who He really was. They realised they really were in the hands of the living God. They would have known how very true were those words to be written fifteen hundred years later – "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10.31).

Isaiah was dumb-struck! (Isaiah 6. 1-5). The very last thing on his mind, when faced with such a scene, was the desire to tell God how great He was because of all His kindness to Isaiah! How utterly cheap such words would have been, and utterly unnecessary, and utterly distracting from God's glory in that awesome scene.

Later on we encounter the same truth in Revelation. In Chapter 7. 9-12, John is given a vision of heavenly worship. It is **wonderful** – God is being worshipped for **who He is**. In Chapter 8.1 – "... there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour". All who were present were awestruck at the grandeur of God, the songs of worship gave way to **total silence**.

Now of course, thankfully and wonderfully, He **IS** "our God". That personal recognition of Him, and allegiance to Him, is totally vital. We think of Thomas, confronted with the evidence before his eyes, exclaiming "My Lord and my God"! (John 20.28). But Thomas was crying out at that moment, not primarily because of any goodness which Jesus had done for Thomas, but because he suddenly realised something of **who Jesus is.**

It is the same for us. We are not Christians primarily because God is nice to us! We are Christians because by God's grace we have been shown something of **who God is!** The fact that He is **my** God, or **our** God, is all very wonderful, but is always, ultimately, **secondary**.

We worship none other than Almighty God, the one, true, living God: I AM THAT I AM. Let us never, ever put our gratitude for what He has done for us **before** our worship of Him for simply **who He is.**

Letter 10 Ambition and the Christian

So the Beijing Olympics have been and gone, and we are left marvelling, but also wondering, at so much that we have seen.

Beijing

The Beijing Games have clearly been a stupendous success on many fronts. The Chinese have gone to such effort and expense to make sure that they were *perfect* in terms of spectacle and organisation. It is unlikely that the drama of the opening and closing ceremonies will ever be equalled in future Games, and we are left asking how on earth the organisers of the London Games of 2012 can respond!

We marvel also at the amazing achievements of the competitors: we have seen such hard work, dedication, ambition, and sheer skill. The desire to win a gold medal becomes all-consuming for so many gifted young sports people across the world. They have spent thousands of hours in gruelling training by way of preparation, devoting themselves to this cause with a devotion simply not given to anything else in their lives.

Is it worth it? Is it right? Is this what sporting achievement should be all about?

Somehow we seem to have lost something of the sheer joy of competing and striving for excellence amongst the best. Success now is *everything*, as displayed in recent days by the reactions of both the successful and the unsuccessful participants.

Chariots of Fire

We can think back to the film "Chariots of Fire", about Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams and the Olympics of 1924 in Paris. The film brought out many of the questions faced then which are still faced now in more acute form.

Abrahams hired a professional coach, and was severely frowned upon by the Establishment for his pains — until he won his gold medal. This raises all the questions about professionalism and amateurism, as well as the whole question of funding, which we are asking again today.

After the Beijing Games attention now switches to how the results of "Team GB" can be improved in 2012, to build on our great successes in Beijing.

It seems that such improvements are closely related to the spending of money – and lots of it. Most of that money comes from the National Lottery, and Sir John Major, Prime Minister at the time that the Lottery was introduced, has been receiving much applause in recent days. The fact that our athletes are funded from gambling profits is no longer deemed worthy of debate!

So we are faced with a stark choice: we either pay large sums of money to an elite few, who will thus go on to have a serious chance of winning medals in 2012; or we cheerfully "muddle through", keeping more of a sense of perspective, and using the funds elsewhere for more worthy causes.

This second option renders British successes in the London Olympics far less likely, resulting no doubt in many howls of despair when the time comes.

But perhaps such an option would help to emphasise something of what the Games *should* be all about: enthusiastic endeavour and the joy of competing with the world's best, while keeping sport in its proper place in human existence – a place that ultimately is not that central.

The second hero of the "Chariots of Fire" film, Eric Liddell, was a very different character of course – a devout Christian who saw his running ability as God's gift, to be used for God's glory.

There are so many stories of Eric's achievements on the track and rugby field that they do not need to be repeated here. His successes are all the more remarkable because his running style was so awful!

 with his arms flailing everywhere and his head so far back that he was looking at the sky.

Incidentally Eric surely would pose a tricky question for any highlypaid modern-day coach. Should the coach seek to swap his extraordinary running style for something more conventional, and risk snuffing out the man's genius? - or should he basically leave him to it, in which case the coach would be out of a job!

For Eric, his running was always a joyful but temporary sideshow, when compared with what his life and calling were really all about. That is not to say that he did not try, and was not as keen as the next man to *win*. But never did he forget Who came first in his life, to the point of course where he refused to run on a Sunday.

After the Paris Olympics Eric returned to China, where he had grown up, as a missionary. Fame sat very lightly on his shoulders, and the notion that wealth and sponsorship would now flow his way was entirely alien. He died in 1945 of a brain tumour in a Japanese internment camp.

"What a waste" we can easily say, but Eric Liddell lived and died serving the Lord as one of Christ's true faithful sheep. We can look back on him as an example of what sport really is all about.

Stanley Matthews

Stanley Matthews is more renowned for his footballing abilities than for his Christian faith, but his approach to his sport still has lessons for today.

Matthews was one of the most gifted footballers of his generation. During the game he would torment the unfortunate defenders ranged against him with his range of skills, but after the final whistle he would go over and shake hands with each of them.

But he would make a quiet point of not shaking hands with any opponent whom he felt had not played the game in the right spirit. Lesser players than Matthews would surely take note, for a

handshake from the great man was a badge of honour, while the lack of a handshake carried its own clear message!

Christian Ambition

Christian people are called to seek first the kingdom of God, with all that that entails; and thus *not* to seek first such goals as fame, success, wealth or glory.

If any of these do come the way of a Christian, they can be received gratefully as blessings from God, and, like everything else in our lives, then laid before the throne of grace and put to the purposes of His kingdom.

So a Christian is perfectly entitled to strive to be the best in his or her field of endeavour – as long as those efforts are always kept in their proper spiritual context under the Lord.

We see from a biblical perspective that ambition, be it in the context today of sport or career or whatever, is wholesome when it involves developing one's gifts to their maximum potential, for the greater glory of God and for the edification of His people.

The Lord, the Lord. He is the Star, around which we, as tiny specks of dust, are to orbit. (The Gospel wonder is of course, that each such speck of dust is deemed immensely precious).

Solomon

"Ask what I shall give thee", the Lord said to Solomon at the start of his reign over Israel (I Kings 3.5) – quite a risky offer!

What would Solomon reply? Fame, glory, wealth, a long life? He got it right, because in asking for "an understanding heart" (v 9) he placed any of his own ambitions at the service of the Lord and His people.

Paul

We can think also of dear Paul, conscious that he was near the end of his life, writing to Timothy (II Timothy 4. 6-8): " – I have fought a

good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness".

What a life he had lived! And yet, come what may, through thick and thin over all those years, all his strivings and longings and ambitions had been to serve the Lord and His people as faithfully as he possibly could.

Did Paul ever think "Hmmm, I wonder what's in this for me? If I play my cards right I'll be famous, I'll be top dog". The very notion is a nonsense! Paul shows us the nature of true ambition properly harnessed to the interests of the Lord: he actually thought of his own interests only very rarely, such as when he had left his coat behind or was longing to see his friends! And even those wishes were to enable him to serve the Lord more effectively.

So whether we are in the elite few who will soon start training for the London Olympics (unlikely, it must be said), or in the ranks of the Lord's disciples serving Him in other ways, it really makes little difference as to what the Lord asks of us.

As Christ's faithful sheep, we are to put the Lord God first, to put others next, and not to bother too much about ourselves. Any ambition, when kept in that context, is wholesome ambition, for such ambition only exists so that God may be given the glory which is His due.

Letter 11 Fundamentalists – ugh?

We are clearly living in times of confusion and godlessness. Wherever we look, people are busily "doing their own thing", which tends to be measured by what suits them rather than by any prevailing sense of Right or Wrong. The constant message coming out of Westminster and the media is that Britain is now a "secular, liberal democracy", which, so the line goes, we should all be very proud about!

Dusty Bibles

But the Bible has not gone away. It is still there on bookshelves up and down the land, full of explanation and guidance and promises, and full of the answers to all our questions about God, and Jesus Christ, and creation, and us, and life and death and everything else!

Yet in most cases the Bible is entirely ignored. It simply no longer counts. People are disturbingly ignorant of its contents, and the general assumption is that anyone who refers to the Bible is some sort of freaky extremist — or, the worst possible insult of all, a fundamentalist!. We are taught to shiver at the very mention of that terrible word!

Fundamentalists

If a Christian fundamentalist is someone who believes the Bible is "God's Word written", then thank God for such fundamentalists! All Anglicans for example, in accepting the "39 Articles" as part of their being Anglicans, acknowledge that the Bible is just this – "God's Word written" (see Article XX). That means that in this clear and basic sense, all Anglicans are "fundamentalists"! – or should be.

Sadly many of them would recoil in horror at being so described, for the notion has got around that intelligent Christians should be very wary of accepting what the Bible has to say in this day and age.

"Brains Outside"

Now nobody is saying that in our approach to the Bible we are "to leave our brains outside", as some occasionally appear to do.

Our brains are themselves God-given, and we are to use them under the authority of the Holy Spirit as we seek the Lord and His ways through the pages of His Word. Nevertheless we are duty-bound, as those seeking to be God's faithful sheep, always to come to the Scriptures with humility and reverence.

Jesus' Approach

In the Gospels, that is all we see the Lord Himself doing in His attitude to what is now for us the Old Testament.

Jesus was wonderfully straightforward in His approach to the Scriptures. He knew them intimately. He believed them totally. He understood them deeply. He applied them instinctively and truly. He was perfectly comfortable in the view that "What Scripture says, God says". In the light of what we see of His approach, we could even say that Jesus was something of a "fundamentalist" Himself!

So let us take heart from all this. The Bible is still God's Word, and as such it remains entirely central to all aspects of human existence. In the light of this simple fact, it is plainly sheer folly for the Bible to be sidelined, ignored, or sneered at by today's "thinking classes", as so often happens.

No more Bible!

"Keep Christianity out of politics!" is the great cry that is raised by foolish, secular voices in Parliament and the media. That statement takes some beating for its sheer ignorance and effrontery! For it gets things entirely back-to-front, in regarding the Bible as an annoying, outdated little appendage to what is happening on the grand stage of Modern Debate.

But which is the very small cart here, and which is the very large horse? Which is the miniscule tail, and which is the powerful dog?

Which should defer to which – the Bible to Modern Debate, or Modern Debate to the Bible?

Empires

Whenever earthly powers have sought to take on and defeat the Bible, and all that it stands for, what has happened? How have their efforts turned out?

Has any earthly power ever got anywhere in its anti-Bible, anti-God efforts? Perhaps some such powers have made some progress in dismissing God – for a time. But they never last, and God always returns to His rightful place on the Victor's Podium!

There is nothing new in this phenomenon – sinful man has never liked being under the gaze of the holy God. "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against His anointed" (Psalm 2.2). The Lord's reaction? – "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision" (v.4).

Think of the great empires of biblical times: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome. Each one was mighty and idolatrous in its day, but each one fell, and is now simply gone, lost in those "mists of time". (In fact, one of those is not gone, but merely hidden: more about that another time!)

Think of Israel herself, reaching her zenith in the glory days of Solomon. And then, little by little, God was edged aside, with the inevitable, dreadful results.

Amidst all the great empires, isn't it significant that it is tiny Israel which is the lone survivor today? Through thick and thin, the Jews still exist as a people, and the restored nation of Israel lies at the heart of world affairs today! There is simply no possible rational explanation for these facts of survival and restoration; the only answer that fits the facts? – the living God is at work.

In more recent times we have had further empires, such as the Ottomans and the Habsburgs, the Napoleonic, the Communist and the Fascist, and even the British Empire.

The message is wonderfully clear - no man-made edifice of power ever withstands the living God for very long, especially if it sets out to be idolatrous or atheistic in the first place.

Islam

Today we are facing strong pressure from the resurgent, would-be global empire of Islam. The eventual outcome of all this pressure is assured! - though the struggle may be long and painful. For, because Islam denies the Godhead of Jesus Christ, Islam is simply doomed like all the other Christ-denying empires that have gone before.

So let's have no more nonsense about marginalising the Bible! The Bible remains God's Word to us all, and we do everyone a favour by referring to the Bible, frequently and naturally, all the time.

If that makes people disparagingly call us "fundamentalists", then so be it. How does the Lord put it? "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5. 11-12).

It is far better for us to follow in the steps of our Lord by giving the Bible its rightful place in our lives, and in wider society, than to cower in silence and then object when the anti-God tide flows in full spate all around us!

Letter 12 The Safety Curtain

Greetings to you in the precious name of the Lord Jesus Christ – may you be in good heart as you seek to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

We have been entrusted with the Lord's vital message of Good News – the gifts of forgiveness and salvation for any who so seek, through faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

It is strange how this Gospel message, in all its beauty and simplicity, is so veiled today.

Marching Bishops

We saw pictures the other day of hundreds of bishops marching through the streets of London, demonstrating in favour of eradicating world poverty. Nothing wrong with that, and the TV cameras were there to spread the message.

But when was the last time we heard the bishops, indeed any bishop, proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ into today's broken world? Perhaps some of them do so proclaim, but we never get to hear of their words because the media pays no attention. But it is more likely that, in a bid to cause no offence and to keep everyone happy, the bishops simply concentrate on other more acceptable themes.

A Non-God Sermon

A few years ago I attended the annual service of a local public school. The church was filled with up to a thousand people – pupils, staff, governors, parents.

The preacher was a certain diocesan bishop, an old boy of the school, (who is still in his episcopal post). He was faced with a thousand people, 95% of whom knew little of the Christian faith and

probably cared even less. What an opportunity! - imagine the relish with which biblical Paul would have tackled that congregation!

But apart from the brief obligatory prayer at the start and end of the sermon, in the sermon itself the bishop *did not mention God once!* We had, if I remember, all the usual woffle about standing together and achieving our goals; nothing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; nothing of the spiritual realities of our lives; nothing of the Gospel.

So away they all went at the end, surely confirmed in their view that the Church and anything it stands for is a total waste of time.

A Bruised Reed ...

The other day I was asked to conduct a service for a thirtieth wedding anniversary, an occasion of thanksgiving and rededication.

The couple had been married in the particular church; the bride had been baptised there; her own parents and grandparents had been married there. So it was a real case of "St _____ is my church". In a sense, it is, even though the dear lady never darkens its doors for decades at a time.

But, here they were, with their families and friends. As befits such an occasion, the ladies were all "dressed to the nines"; the men mostly flashy, ear-ringed and tattooed; the children generally ill-behaved, attracting comments such as "Ooh, he's such a monkey, that one". There was the usual pre-service gathering outside the church – noisy, nervous laughter, profuse smoking of cigarettes, the clicking of cameras.

Then they all came in, by now even more nervous, still somewhat giggly and ill-at-ease, and we went through the service.

It was interesting. For the couple, something real was happening. They have had their joys and sorrows over the years, but this really was a time of re-commitment to one another.

Their spiritual understanding was limited and inarticulate, but that sweet verse from Isaiah 42 came to mind – "A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench".

There was *something* there, which the bride at least had recognised and responded to, and her husband, give him his due, had gone along with.

The members of the congregation were generally quiet and cooperative – though we had the ubiquitous naughty little boy in his sequined waistcoat cavorting around at the front for a time, watched from afar by his adoring mother.

In a short address, I did explain the Gospel within the context of the whole occasion, in ways I hope that were kind and real.

The Safety Curtain

As I did so, the usual thing happened.

Do you remember at the theatre how the Safety Curtain is slowly lowered at the start of the Interval? It divides the audience from the stage, sealing them off, allowing nothing to pass.

So often that is a perfect picture of what happens when the Gospel is preached! You can *see* those Safety Curtains gliding slowly down over people's faces! They glaze over, close down, switch off: nothing of the Gospel message shall pass beyond those thick Safety Curtains.

I did not risk inviting them all to say the Lord's Prayer together – that old bridge between "church" and "non-church" seems to have gone. The closing hymn – "All things bright and beautiful" – was sung, as far as I could tell, by me alone!

Now I mention this occasion in some detail as being a useful example of "where we are at".

It is no surprise for us to recognise afresh that for the great majority of people in our land, "church" is totally irrelevant.

There are still many however who do have distant connections with the church, as with the couple on this occasion, who will instinctively turn to the church on significant family occasions.

They expect the church to be there, to be open and welcoming, and to do what they require of it. And that, after all, is still the obligation of the Church of England "by law established".

We must be glad for these links, and humbly seek to make the most of the opportunities they offer – a presenting of the Gospel truths in ways that are courteous but clear.

If for any reason the church does not oblige, then the reaction of such people is usually one of instant indignation. "How dare they? And they call themselves Christians!" is a very common reaction.

I heard recently of a Vicar who refused to baptise a young boy who is being adopted by a homosexual couple. "What bigots!" cried one of the future "grand-mothers", who is herself an atheist — "How DARE they reject a little boy?"

The mind boggles over all that is going on in this situation! All I can say is – thank the Lord for the Vicar who had the courage to say "Sorry, no can do".

But just look at the vitriolic anger that has been aroused, and the Vicar's refusal will never be forgotten.

It is in such cases that we observe the reality of the vicious spiritual battle that is going on, involving the "principalities, the powers, the rulers of darkness of this world, and spiritual darkness in high places" of Ephesians 6.12. Those words were no example of Paul getting a bit carried away – they are simple truth!

The Word of Life

When all is said and done, we are entrusted with the task of "holding forth the word of life" (Philippians 2.16) in this topsy-turvy world.

No doubt old ways and new ways of doing this will all have their place. But I am struck above all by the current "elephant in the room" which nobody seems to remark upon: that the task of bursting through those Safety Curtains all around us can *only* be done by the Holy Spirit.

We all have our part to play of course: consistency, integrity, goodness, approachability, warmth, sensitivity, kindness, fun, a "word in due season" - all remain ever-necessary.

But none of those qualities, *of themselves*, is a Safety Curtain-buster. That busting-through, that demolition of the gates of brass, is a hidden, beautiful, spiritual work, entrusted to the Holy Spirit alone.

Remembering that fact is a great comfort, and a great encouragement. "Converting people" is *God's* task: He does not *want* us to do it; He does not want us to *try* to do it; He makes it perfectly plain that we *cannot* do it.

Let us instead be found faithful in playing our part – and not get in the way of the Holy Spirit while He plays His part.

Letter 13 Paul and a Shipwreck

"And now I exhort you to be of good cheer" (Acts 27.22) — Paul's words to the scared, bedraggled people around him on the deck of that little ship as it was driven before the storm to they knew not where.

Fear and Uncertainty

We are not facing a literal shipwreck I trust, but we are all facing rough seas, strong storms and an uncertain future. We see around us the gradual rise of a feeling of uncertainty mingled with fear. Why is everything going wrong? Where is it all going to lead to? What can we be doing to protect and survive?

Paul and his companions had already had a terrible time of it. Paul was a prisoner of course, in the custody of a Roman centurion, as he was being escorted to Rome to appeal to Caesar.

There is something rather tragic about all this! After literally years of being used as a pawn by the various rulers to placate the Jews, Paul had appealed to Caesar (Acts 25.11), to avoid being sent back to Jerusalem to stand before his Jewish accusers yet again. He suspected from experience that they would stop at nothing to be rid of him – be it an ambush or a rigged trial. The long process was thus set in train for him to be taken to Rome. But meanwhile he was given the opportunity to address King Agrippa and Festus, the provincial governor (Acts 26), with extraordinary results! He brought Agrippa to the brink of Christian belief (v 28), and could have been released had he not already appealed to Caesar (vv 31-32).

God's Will

I wonder if Paul realised this for himself, in the many months which followed: that all that he was going through was in one sense entirely unnecessary!

This raises deep questions for us in our own discipleship walk, about our being inside or outside God's will. Was it the Lord's will that Paul should appeal to Caesar and be sent to Rome? Or was this a case of Paul being impetuous or fearful, and acting on a silly impulse?

Frankly, we do not know! – and no doubt we experience such a dilemma ourselves often enough. But what we do know is that the Lord in His mercy still wove what was happening into His overall tapestry.

The fact is that, perhaps like Paul on this occasion, we clearly get things very wrong, very often. But the Lord is never taken aback, is never taken by surprise. He does indeed "work all things together for good" (Romans 8.28) – as He was to do for Paul and his companions on that frightening voyage.

Crete

The problems began in Crete. The sailing season was fast drawing to a close (Acts 27.9), and the ship needed to spend the winter months in a harbour that was safe from storms – unlike Fair Havens (vv 8 and 12).

For the first time in this story Paul spoke up, warning that trouble lay ahead (v 10). But, not surprisingly, the centurion ignored Paul and agreed to the ship being moved along the coast of Crete to a more suitable harbour at Phenice (v 12). Sure enough, "when the south wind blew softly" (v 13, AV – what a lovely phrase!), they set sail, on a voyage of a day or so with the prospect of a very long holiday to come over the winter!

But then "Euroclydon", a tempestuous wind, blew up, and suddenly everything changed. (It is interesting that the wind of trouble begins with "Euro"!).

They had to run helplessly before the storm (v 15), undergirding the ship's hull with cables, striking the sails, and ditching much of the tackle (vv 17 and 19). After "many days", they had given up all hope of survival (v 20).

Cheer Up!

Here then is the context in which Paul stood forth and cheered them all up (v 21). What a man! – and what comfort he brought!

He had been fasting for a good few days (v 21) –and, by implication, praying earnestly. The angel of God had appeared before him (vv 23-24), with a message of tremendous encouragement for Paul himself: Fear not! (v 24).

Yes, Paul too had been fearful. We see that in some ways he is a spiritual superman, but in others ways he is just like the rest of us!

He was to put away all fear for two reasons. First, he *must* be brought before Caesar. What comfort there was for Paul in those words! Not only was he being told he would survive this voyage and get safely to Rome, he was also being assured, after all these apparently aimless, wasted months, that he was on the Lord's track, and that the Lord would indeed ensure that Paul would encounter Caesar.

And secondly, more importantly, he was to set aside fear because *God had given all on board to Paul!* (v 24).

This is quite extraordinary. All the people on that ship were to survive, because one faithful man was in their midst.

What a God! What mercy. What grace.

What is most striking about this wonderful story is how God took an ordinary, not very nice man, and used him in such extraordinary ways.

For Paul really was not a "nice man" in any conventional sense, especially in his earlier days. He would never have been easy company; how would you view the prospect of Paul having a meal in your home one evening? It would be all very interesting and exciting perhaps, but hardly relaxing! He was prickly, opinionated and quick to point out when he had been right and others wrong (eg here, v 21).

And yet, and yet! - how he loved the Lord. How he stayed faithful to His Lord through everything that life threw at him. How he was the Holy Spirit's instrument for the birth of numerous little churches in dreadful pagan cities; he visited them, wrote to them, prayed for them, yearned for them.

Did he have any hobbies? Did he ever have a day off, let alone a holiday? He was utterly committed to the Lord, and to the calling which the Lord had given to him. "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1.21); and we see from his life that he meant it.

How the Lord used him, and how much the rest of us owe to him!

Ordinary and Extraordinary

But for us of course, the point is — Paul was still very ordinary! We worship the same Lord as did Paul. We are filled with the same Holy Spirit. We live in an age still full of idols and falsehoods and ravening wolves. We are entrusted with the same Gospel, to live and proclaim.

It did not depend on Paul, but on the Lord. Just so, it does not depend on us, but on the Lord. Our task, alongside Paul, is to stay faithful, "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12.2). It is as we do that, that the Lord then graciously uses us as He sees fit. We may all end up as latter-day Saint Pauls, or as entirely unnoticed disciples. No matter – for that is simply not the point.

The point is that in Christ, we can *all* be of good cheer, and we can *all* fear not! We are to show that great truth in our lives, and make known that great truth through our lives.

And finally, 275 people were rescued because of Paul (Acts 27.37). Nothing has changed. Even so, even now, your very Christian presence can be making a divine difference, wherever you are, and wherever you go. That is quite a thought!

Letter 14 Keeping Going

Greetings to all Faithful Sheep Members! "Mercy unto you, and peace, and love, be multiplied" (Jude 2).

Poor Gordon Brown is "going through the mill" at present. Bad news for him personally, and for the government, comes thick and fast. The press and media are having a field day in terms of analysis, comment and advice, while we gather that many backbench Labour MPs are becoming seriously concerned about their job prospects!

While I have nothing political to say to the Prime Minister in this Letter, we can certainly identify with how he must be feeling behind that famous black front door.

Tough Going

Christian people are no strangers to the fact that sometimes life is just plain tough! In the Bible, throughout the history of the Church, and in our own experience, we have many examples of God's people having things far from easy.

In times of great trial, the pressing question comes down to something very simple: Should I go on regardless, pushing through to what I hope will be final success? Or should I stop, change direction, and set off on a new path?

Noah

We can imagine Noah having tremendous doubts! (especially Genesis Chapter 6). Here he was, taking decades to build some vast barge-like ship miles from the sea. He would have faced ridicule and possible sabotage from without; and from within, a constant, nagging doubt — "Am I really getting this right? Should we carry on? Or should I just pack it in, and quietly move off somewhere else, and forget this whole mad project?".

Noah, by God's grace and God-given faith, pressed on – and it was just as well for us all that he did!

Jeremiah

Nearly two thousand years later, Jeremiah, like so many of his colleagues amongst the prophets, found himself faced with the same question: Carry on, or shut up? Nobody was listening. He was sneered at, misreported, threatened, imprisoned. By going on, he had absolutely nothing to gain in an earthly sense. By giving up, he could have returned to a quiet life in the land of Benjamin, and let the kings and the people just get what was coming to them!

Again, for Jeremiah, he went on, for in that situation, his going-on was the path of obedience to the Lord.

Jesus

Jesus went on, through those struggles at the start with the devil, and through those struggles in Gethsemane with Himself.

We thank God that He did.

"Never give up!"

Let us move on to our own times. We can mention here the well-known story of Churchill being asked to give a speech at his old school, Harrow. The great man stood up before them all and gave his speech: "Never give up!". That is all he said, before sitting down again! His own life is a stirring example of his doing just that.

But!

We must recognise though that never giving up is fine – and comes over strongly in Scripture as being the general norm for God's people – given one crucial condition.

That crucial condition is an obvious one: that I am really, truly, deeply sure that I **am** on the right track!

If I am **not** on the right track, then the very worst advice I can be given is to be told – "Never give up"! For anyone who is on the wrong track, the sooner he or she does give up, and change direction, the better.

How do I know?

This puts us firmly into the twin realms of guidance and faith.

We can define "the right track" as being the track that is pleasing to the Lord, the track that is "His will" for me at this time.

We are far more likely to be on that right track, and to remain on it, if we remain close to Christ the Good Shepherd day by day.

Our prayers, of speaking and listening, and our reading of God's Word, and of our acting upon it, are crucial daily habits, linked with our active membership of a local church fellowship.

These basic Christian habits will keep us "in the swim", keeping us conscious of God's sovereignty and thinking and guidings.

The projects we are involved in - how we actually use the time, energy and money at our disposal - will inevitably be shaped by the Holy Spirit with such habits.

Appraisal

Even so, there remains a place of regular, humble appraisal of our lives under the Lord. How prone we are, and always will be, to "err and stray from His ways like lost sheep".

We can ask ourselves if all within our lives is in accord with God's Word, as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. Anything that does not pass this test needs our prompt attention – of acknowledgement, repentance, confession, and setting aside.

This is the main step, again so common in Scripture, where it is absolutely right to give up, and to do so as soon as possible.

If and when we are confronted in our lives with things that are clearly wrong, then we must tell the person urging us "never to give up" to taking the proverbial running jump!

This appraisal can be done alone with the Lord, as well as with fellow "faithful sheep", as we seek to bear one another's burdens (eg, Galatians 6.2). Gentleness, honesty, humility, under the Lord and with one another, are the watchwords here.

Faith

By following these simple spiritual habits, we can hopefully play our part in keeping on the right track - that is, on the track that is right for us under the Lord.

And then, it is a question of faith – of steadily holding to that track, through thick and thin. But we see that this version of "never giving up" is not merely a case of blind, bloody-minded human will in the face of all the odds.

Rather it is a Spirit-confirmed, Spirit-enabled *grace* to continue in the Lord's paths, come what may.

All the Lord's dear ones who have gone before us, within Scripture and since, and who "never gave up", did so purely within God's grace. They kept going *by faith*, even when everything around them was shouting at them that what they were doing was nonsense. Look at Hebrews Chapter 11 and read again that great Roll of Honour – of those who never gave up.

There is a very telling little verse in John 6.66 – "From that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him".

Jesus was faced with that same pressing question: Do I go on? – or do I change tack, being softer and easier on my critics, building bridges with them, becoming more attractive and popular?

He "never gave up", for He truly followed the will of His heavenly Father.

It is the same for us. It is even the same for Mr Gordon Brown. We must pray for him, that in all the shouting, he may have the time and the will to hear the still, small voice of the living God.

Letter 15 Practising the Presence of Jesus

"Walking with God" is the right spiritual pace for those seeking to be God's "faithful sheep".

In that walking, we can, and hopefully do, dwell within the Lord's "shalom" – that state of peace which the Lord intends for each of His children. It is the peace which remains unaffected by whatever else is going on in or around our lives – steady, constant, untouchable, and very comforting! Hence Paul can write that he has learned to be *content* (Philippians 4.11). Is contentment not the ultimate sign that we are dwelling within shalom?

"Practising the Presence of the Lord"

So the essence of this "walking with God" is really very simple, at least in theory! The one who walks with God is the one who is ever-conscious of being in the presence of the Lord.

That phrase brings to mind dear Brother Lawrence, a 17th century Carmelite monk. He was born into a family of humble origins in Lorraine, and as a young man he served as a soldier, and then as a footman to various employers. Apparently he was not a very good footman, for he was described as "a great awkward fellow who broke everything"!

When he was over fifty years old – a considerable age for those times – he became a "lay brother" in the Carmelite Order in Paris, where he was given the name Brother Lawrence.

His ministry – he served in the kitchens. There was just one slight problem: Lawrence didn't like working in the kitchens! And yet, over the years, God did a real work of grace in the life of this very ordinary man.

Lawrence slowly learned this simple, central truth – and he must have had to learn it the hard way: that we are to do everything, how ever grand or menial may be the task, out of our love for God.

Each task is done in the Lord's name, out of our love for Him, and for His greater glory.

Brother Lawrence called this habit simply "practising the presence of Jesus". We practise His presence in the small things, and in the great things, of our lives; when we are being noticed, or unnoticed; when we are being praised or being blamed. The rhythm remains unaffected – for it is a rhythm which expresses the old truth of our walking with God within a state of shalom.

Lawrence died in 1691, at the age of 86. He had had a fair few years in those kitchens! But what a lovely example he has been for the rest of us.

The Unseen Guest

On the wall in some Christian homes, especially in years gone by, you could find a simple picture with the words – "Christ is the unseen visitor to our home, the unseen guest at our table, the unseen listener to our conversation".

It is very easy in this day and age to be dismissive of such a picture, as being twee or old-fashioned. But why should we be dismissive? Those words get us to the heart of the matter – that we are always in the presence of the Lord, whether or not we are acknowledging that fact.

Perhaps the Christian homes of our land would benefit from a resurgence of such pictures – not only for our sakes, but for the sake of all those who come into our homes.

"Take it to the Lord in prayer"

"Take it to the Lord in prayer" is how one of the old hymns puts it, bringing us to another sign of walking with God.

Whatever comes across our path, wherever, whenever, let our first reaction be to take it to the Lord in prayer.

Such a habit acknowledges His presence and His Lordship, in this situation, here and now. It is a shalom-reaction. It is the reaction of a faithful sheep, going straight to the Shepherd when any wolf may be prowling about.

"Here we are, Father, as your redeemed children..... Here is the situation. Please work this through as you wish, use us as you may wish, and bring glory to your name through this situation. We offer this prayer in Jesus' name".

A simple prayer such as this immediately offers this time, place and situation into the hands of God our Father, for His gracious activity.

The Prayer Habits of Moses

Think of poor Moses, leading God's people from Egypt, through the wilderness towards the promised land. Moses did not want the job. He had not applied for it! – and when God appointed him, Moses was full of excuses as to why his leading the Israelites was actually a very bad idea¹⁴.

But there he was, up front, the go-between for God and His people. And just see how they moaned! There was always something they could find to complain about: Pharaoh's army about to massacre them; no meat, no drink; no food, boring food; Egypt was better than here; Canaan's full of giants; etc, etc! Just think of the effect of all this moaning on Moses! — it was enough to make any man hand in his notice.

But he didn't: he knew he was a man under orders. Instead, he continued to walk with God, plod, plod, plod, plod. In each situation that arose, straightaway Moses would "take it to the Lord in prayer".

He knew he couldn't solve this, that and the other problem. But he also knew they were in the presence of the living God, and that it was

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¹⁴ Exodus 3...

God, not Moses nor anyone else, who was in charge of this Exodus project¹⁵. It was God's work, and it needed God's provision step by step.

Because Moses knew those simple truths, and applied them, he was able boldly to bring any need to the throne of grace; and God heard, and God answered. That deep confidence in the closeness and faithfulness of God enabled Moses to dwell within shalom, despite his weariness and frequent exasperation.

Today

And God still hears and answers today. He hasn't changed! His promises are still all there on the table, to be claimed by His children step by step along the way.

As we walk with God, consciously in His presence moment by moment, receiving the shalom He offers, we can talk *to* Him, and hear *from* Him. The walk is a walk of companionship, a road-to-Emmaus type walk, where every step taken is taken in the presence of the Risen Lord: there is fellowship, understanding, joy, friendship, support, guidance, encouragement, warmth, surprise, welcome, appreciation, love. Quite some walk!

Now there will certainly be times in any day when we are not directly conscious of the Lord moment by moment, because our attention is, quite naturally, absorbed elsewhere.

The Lord understands this. There is no need to feel guilty when this happens, along the lines of – "Oh Lord forgive me, I haven't thought about you for the past half hour". He understands.

Perhaps we are wading through a pile of tasks at work, or out shopping, or concentrating on our driving, or seeing to the children, or doing some sums, or even playing the bagpipes; inevitably our concentration and energies become focused on what is to be done.

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¹⁵ See for example Exodus 15.23-25

But even so, there will often be little pauses, gaps in what we are doing; and whenever there is one of those, a turn to the Lord, a brief word with the Shepherd, is all to the good. This is one of our privileges as His sheep.

The more we can cultivate this simple habit of turning to the Lord, the better. Let us get to the stage where we do this instinctively, naturally, constantly, without thought or conscious effort. The sheep who does that is far more likely to be staying faithful, for he or she will be truly walking with God, taking each step of the way with Him.

It does not take long for us to realise that God is ever-present, everywhere, and sovereign over everything. As we walk through life with Him today, every experience we have is in fact under Him – under his gaze, and under His authority. We can thank Him for all that is good. We can repent, on behalf of ourselves and of others, for all that is wrong, bad, ugly. We can intercede for every situation of need, and indeed even for every person we encounter.

The faithful sheep walks through every experience in life consciously within the presence of the Good Shepherd, and the more that the sheep can remember that central truth, and apply it, the better for all concerned.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks ...

This helps us understand more clearly the Holy Spirit's words to us through Paul in I Thessalonians Chapter 5¹⁶. "Rejoice evermore", the Spirit tells us: yes, because of all the blessings given to us, here, now.

"Pray without ceasing": yes, because at every step of the way the faithful sheep is talking constantly with the Shepherd.

"In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you": yes, again because of all the spiritual facts centred in the Lord Jesus Christ; and yes, because that attitude of

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¹⁶ I Thessalonians 5.16-19

thankfulness is the very will of God – His wish, His instruction to His sheep.

This all points to the fact that the "default mode" of a faithful sheep is thankfulness!

As this walk with God becomes more natural and instinctive, we find that it colours all we see, and shapes all we do. For gradually the sheep are becoming imbibed with the views of the Shepherd: His concerns, His priorities slowly become their own. How He sees the world is how, eventually, we will come to see the world. Our lives, our very beings, are indeed slowly changed, as the Holy Spirit replaces the great "Me" within me with the Lord Himself.

Here is something of what the phrase "We have the mind of Christ" means¹⁷. There is nothing arrogant in that statement – it has come to be true because of the growing Lordship of Christ in our lives. We are diminished – and are glad to be! But the Lord is exalted.

What a walk, what a work, and what a blessing!

As the worldly clamour of "Christmas" grows to its usual Santa-frenzy around us once again in coming days, may we view it all with something of "the mind of Christ". Doesn't simplicity remain the key? Simple worship; simple friendship; simple expenditure; simple consumption; simple love.

May our homes and lives be places where Christ Himself feels at home, and where Christ Himself is humbly worshipped as Lord, as Saviour, as Emmanuel, God with us.

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¹⁷ I Corinthians 2.16b

Letter 16 The Thinning Crowds

In Matthew Chapter 4 we are told of Jesus' arriving in Capernaum at the start of His public ministry. He had heard that John the Baptist had been put into prison (v 12), and realised that, as John had now been set aside, the time had arrived for Jesus Himself to take centre stage.

Now of course Jesus was entering very much into a *Jewish* culture at this time. He Himself was one of them, and repeatedly throughout the Gospels we hear that He saw His mission as being first and foremost to His own fellow Jews.

The people were spiritually "warm". They knew their Scriptures (what for us of course is the Old Testament). They had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah, the Anointed One, to be sent from God; this wonderful figure would restore the kingdom of Israel. In recent years John the Baptist had been in their midst, telling them the time was near, and that they were to be baptised as a sign of repentance for their sins.

So the scene was certainly set. Comparatively, Jesus' mission was a straightforward one — to tell the expectant people that here He was, the Messiah in their midst. Not only did He *tell* them, He also *showed* them, by His many wonderful miracles before their very eyes.

The Surging Crowds!

In Matthew 4.17, Jesus began to preach. It was a message of "repentance" to the people, for the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

His arrival was soon to cause multitudes to trek for miles to see and hear Him, and to bring their sick relatives for His healing touch; they were not to be disappointed! (vv 23-25).

"Follow Me ..."

But see how in v 18 the scene suddenly switches, away from excited crowds being told to repent, to a few fishermen by the Lake.

"Follow me – and I will make you fishers of men". Those words were all it took – extraordinary! We are not told whether or not Jesus had emcountered these fishermen before. Very likely He had, and they would have talked and listened and wondered about this remarkable figure in their midst.

But whatever was going on in the minds of Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John that day, when the instruction came, "Follow me" – they did, just like that.

We have all been familiar with this simple story since Sunday School, but the marvel of what happened still excites! There was *something* about this man that persuaded them.

They turned aside from all that was familiar to them, from all their security, from their wives and children and boats and income and very lives! Can we imagine for a moment the reaction of old Zebedee (v 21) asking his boys what on earth they thought they were playing at? And can we imagine what they said in reply – if anything?

Yet, off they went, scrunching along that beach alongside Jesus, with little idea what they were doing, where it would lead to, or what it all meant. It was just something that had to be done!

Responding to the call of Jesus was, in its way, so scarily simple!

A Change of Mind

When we move on just a few years, we see how things had changed!

The crowds continued to follow wherever Jesus went – He could very rarely escape from them, and it is amazing how He kept drawing on His reserves of energy and compassion to keep ministering to them.

But at the end the crowds had suddenly had enough. "Crucify, crucify!" was their awful, howling cry. Despite all the warmth, all the expectancy, all the preparedness, ultimately the Jews rejected their Messiah. What an array of dreadful, spiritual forces must have been at play behind the scenes to bring about this terrible outcome!

"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him ..." (Isaiah 53.10). This awfulness was foreknown by the Father, and probably half foreknown by the Son, and yet was undergone to break the power of sin and death, and to win us back. "O the depth of the riches both of wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11.33).

Faithful to the End

But not everyone cried "Crucify!"

Some stayed faithful, through thick and thin, albeit with times of weakness, denial and desertion.

Some gave their very lives rather than deny Jesus as Christ, Lord and Messiah! Of those four young fisherman called on the beach that day long ago, only John died a natural death, the others being called to martyrdom for the sake of their Lord.

So, as so often in the Christian life, we are faced with a contrast: the cheering crowds – and the faithful few; the broad path - and the strait gate; the applause of the world - or the smile of the Father.

We are comforted afresh by the words of Jesus - "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine" (John 10.14). That is good enough for us!

Letter 17 The God Behind the Scenes

"The Lord be with you".

So spoke Boaz when he arrived in his field one day outside Bethlehem (Ruth 2.4). He was greeting his workers! – and they duly responded, "The Lord bless thee".

Such an exchange tells us much about Boaz, and about the obvious care he took with what today is termed "industrial relations". Within these exchanges between the Boss and his workers, we see real mutual respect and courtesy, within a shared faith in God.

Boaz had no idea of the way his life was about to be transformed! He was quite a wealthy man, well-thought of in the community, and here he was involved in another harvest, just the latest in a long line of such harvests.

What he did not know was that God was graciously at work in bringing His purposes to pass, and only revealing those purposes when it suited Him.

A distant relative of Boaz, Naomi, had had a terrible time of it. Years before, she and her husband and sons had left home in Bethlehem to find food and work over in Moab, a neighbouring country which tended to be not over-friendly towards the people of Israel.

Naomi's husband died in Moab. Her sons married local girls, and presumably at that time Naomi decided to "stay put" in exile, to be near the family. But then her sons died too.

Naomi had had to move from her home. One by one, her loved ones had been taken away. Here she was, left in Moab with no prospect of support. She would have to return, humiliated and crestfallen, to Bethlehem.

But what must she have been thinking in these long, lonely weeks and months? Did her prayers slowly wither away to nothing? Did she shake a puny fist in God's direction (Ruth 1.13, 20,21)? We certainly don't get the impression that Naomi flew through this time scoring top spiritual marks! She was thoroughly ground down, weary, bitter; she had had enough.

After setting out together for Bethlehem there was a change of heart (1.6ff). Naomi urged the girls to return to their parents' homes and remarry. The three broken-hearted women wept and hugged and kissed; it was a scene of *utter sadness!*

Orpah finally left them, but Ruth would not go (1.14): "Where you go, I will go; your people will be my people – and your God my God". What devotion and love! We learn so much about both Naomi and Ruth from those simple words spoken by Ruth. We see how from the ashes of despair, love and hope sprang forth – as they still do.

To Naomi at that time, the Lord must have seemed totally distant. But He wasn't distant at all, and in later years Naomi would look back on many moments in her life and detect, with hindsight, how the Lord had been gently there all along.

But the future was still full of foreboding. Naomi may have been back in her home town of Bethlehem, but she had no husband or income. She had much bitterness, gossippy neighbours, a very patchy faith – and Ruth.

The only way they could survive was for Ruth to go and glean in the local fields. This was very humiliating for anyone! It was a public statement of poverty and dependence on charity, and Ruth, a foreigner and young widow, was going to be especially vulnerable to the nudges and remarks from the workers around her in the fields.

But she went without a second glance, for Naomi's sake. Here again the Lord intervened with nobody noticing He was there at all. For Ruth found herself in the field of – Boaz, that good and gracious man, who just so happened to be one of Naomi's distant relations.

How beautifully this story is told; and how beautifully it steadily unfolds! It speaks of such ordinary people, knocked this way and that, and yet steadily plodding on together. And all the time, at every single step of the way, they are in the *utter* care of the Lord.

What delightful innocence we find when Ruth, in answer to Naomi's question, says she has been in the field of Boaz. It means nothing to Ruth, beyond her saying how kind he is being. But for Naomi? For the first time perhaps for many years, there is a tiny glint in her elderly eye!

We then come across that ancient practice whereby a widow was to be taken as wife by a kinsman of her late husband, that the children of this second marriage would enable the name and the line of the first husband to continue. Intriguingly in this case, a field was involved: whoever bought Naomi's field was also to receive Ruth as his wife – interesting priorities in those days!

Naomi tells Ruth what she must do: she is to approach Boaz and ask him to take her in as his wife.

The scene is once again beautifully told. We read of Boaz's understandable shock, in the hours before dawn, of finding a woman asleep at his feet! He quickly understands the situation, and reassures Ruth that he will do his best — but there is just one problem: there is a kinsman closer than Boaz to Naomi, who has first call on the wretched field, and on Ruth!

We can imagine the anxiety as Boaz carefully negotiates with his elderly relative. "Yes, I'll buy the field" the old man says: disaster! (4.4). But then it is pointed out to him that Ruth is "part of the package". She will have children, who will be entitled to a share in the old man's inheritance with the children he has already. "Then I can't go ahead – you have it, Boaz". Phew!

So the deal is finalised in the appropriate manner, and Boaz emphasises before them all that he has taken "Ruth the Moabitess, wife of Mahlon" to be his wife. The crowd wish God's blessing on them (4.11-12).

A child is duly born, amidst great rejoicing. He is named Obed – meaning "serving" - not by his parents or grandmother, but by the neighbours! This little fellow truly belonged to them all, and was a source of such blessing.

In due time Obed became the father of Jesse – and Jesse the father of David: the great grandmother of King David was none other than Ruth the Moabitess, who happened to wander into the field of Boaz all those years ago.

So in the end, all turned out so well. The Lord had steadily brought them through every downfall and tragedy, even when He was being least noticed.

We can't even hail this story as a triumph of faith on Naomi's part. For much of the time this dear soul was grumpy and bitter – and yet still the Lord blessed her!

"The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him" (Nahum 1.7).

"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil 4.6-7).

Had she known them, Naomi would have doubted both those scriptures. But she would have been proved gloriously wrong to do so!

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Letter 18 Harps Hung on Willows

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion" (Psalm 137.1).

God's judgement had finally fallen on the people of Judah. He had sent His prophets over many years, whose message had always been the same: the people were to repent, to turn again to the living God, to uphold His covenant in deed as well as in word. Then would God's impending judgement be turned aside, and His protection and blessing would flow once more.

False Prophets

Time after time the Lord's prophets were spurned. Sometimes they were merely laughed at, but at other times matters turned very nasty. The chief enemies of these great prophets were not so much the people themselves, nor even the kings, but the host of priests and false prophets who made a comfortable living around the court. These were the ones who uttered all sorts of reassuring words, according to what they thought their audience would appreciate hearing!

We can think of a man like Hananiah (Jeremiah 28), who blatantly contradicted Jeremiah's many warnings by claiming that the Lord had broken Babylon's power; indeed, he said, within two years the first wave of exiles would have returned and all would be well within Jerusalem once more. Jeremiah declared the Lord's judgement on this false prophet Hananiah, a judgement which resulted in his death soon afterwards (Jeremiah 28.17).

Vindication

Jeremiah's authenticity as a true prophet of the Lord was fully vindicated when, sure enough, Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 39). King Zedekiah was blinded and carried off in chains to Babylon, along with many of his people.

Hence the pathetic scene of Psalm 137. Their Babylonian captors had to said the Jewish exiles, "Go on then, sing us some of your own songs!" – but they couldn't.

Instead they just hung their instruments on the branches of the trees by the river, and wept. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" they asked (verse 4); the very thought of Jerusalem, and of all that they had lost, was just too much.

Today

Now mercifully we today are not in exile in a strange land. But even so, there is a great deal of weariness around and about, a metaphorical hanging of harps on the willows.

For many people are worn down, anxious, fearful for the future. We are told that the economic recession is the worst this country has ever known, with the government running up mind-numbingly vast debts in a bid to bring us through it.

Those debts are due to take generations to be repaid.

All around us we see social breakdown and family break-up.

The figures for those being made redundant creep steadily up. The nation faces problems on many fronts, and no matter which politicians seek to tackle them, not much progress appears to be made.

Gems of Hope

The Jewish exiles in Babylon found it very tough. They had ignored the warnings of Jeremiah and his colleagues — and so they had probably missed the little gems of hope which he had also given them from the Lord.

In particular Jeremiah had told them how long their exile would last (Jeremiah 25.11) – a period of seventy years. Later on (Chapter 30), the Lord told His people through Jeremiah that He would bring them

again into their own land. This would be a time of blessing once more, with a new covenant, written on the hearts of the people (Jeremiah 31.13).

So even when times were grim, the Lord had not abandoned His wayward people, even when they were tempted to think that He had. He was certainly turning His face from them, as He had forewarned, but all the time His promises stood firm – a time of restoration would surely come; and come it duly did, culminating in the arrival of the Messiah Himself.

Tenderness and Faithfulness

We see from such passages that the Lord is a God of great tenderness and faithfulness. He does punish, if His warnings have gone unheeded, but never does He abandon; there is always hope, and there are always His promises – promises which He always keeps, in His own good time and in His good way.

Today, many heads are cast down, both within and beyond Christ's Church. That in itself may well be wholesome, if lessons are going to be learnt from all the follies of excess of recent years. We can pray that the Lord will in His mercy work these things together for good (Romans 8.28).

But just as the Jews in Babylon had those gems of hope, so too do we today. In fact we possess many more such gems than they did.

We have all the Gospel privileges poured out by the Lord on His children. We have the Lord Jesus Himself. We have the Holy Spirit, the Bible, the Church, one another.

We have all of His promises, and all of His provisions. We have food in our stomachs, roofs over our heads, clothes on our bodies and shoes on our feet. We have access to free health care. We have freedom to gather, freedom to worship, freedom to proclaim the Good News. We have an elected government, an impartial Civil Service, an accountable police force and the rule of law.

It is quite a list, and we could go on!

No wonder then the Holy Spirit tells us through Paul to - "Have no anxiety about anything!" (Philippians 4.6). Instead we are to rejoice, give thanks, pray, press on, keeping our hands to the plough, and seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Sowing the Seed

When times are materially tough, as they are becoming so now, often such times offer much more fertile soil than normal for the good seed of the Gospel of Christ.

Among our various other Christian roles, we are still sowers of the seed of Christ.

The original sower in Jesus' story just walked steadily up and down, up and down, casting the seed, without getting too bothered as to what was going to become of it! It wasn't his job to *grow* it, but to *sow* it. Just so for us.

So let us be of good cheer, "holding forth the word of life", in life and deed and word (Philippians 3.16).

It is through the bountiful mercies of God, that we **can** still "sing the Lord's song in a strange land" – and we need to do so, for everyone's sake.

Letter 19 A Hearty Sing!

It's time for a good hearty sing!

As Christian people we can read, we can listen, we can pray, we can talk – and we can *sing*.

The Christian Gospel, in which we by God's grace have a part, is a Gospel of joy, of hope, of light and life. No wonder we express our worship to the God of heaven in song!

Moses

The first song we have specifically mentioned in Scripture is the song of Moses on the sea shore, after the Lord's great deliverance of His people from the hand of the Egyptians (Exodus 15). The people joined in (verse 1), praising God together from the depth of their hearts.

A Service of Song

In I Chronicles 6.31 we read that David had set various people "over the service of song" in the house of the Lord, that is, in that time, the tabernacle. Song was seen to have a definite, official place within the worship life of the people, and particular individuals were appointed to look after it.

The Psalms

The Psalms are of course the main example of song within the Bible, most of them coming to be used on approach to, or within, the temple in Jerusalem. The Psalms encompass all our moods, all our hopes and fears, brought before the God of Israel; truly they constitute the "Jewish Hymn Book", and the Holy Spirit still uses them to speak to us, and to draw us close into the presence of the Lord.

In Isaiah 42.10-12 we read "Sing unto the Lord a new songLet the wilderness and the cities thereof lift up their voice ... let the inhabitants of the rocks sing, let them shout from the top of the mountains Let them give glory unto the Lord, and declare his praise in the islands".

At the end of the Last Supper (Matthew 26.30) Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn before setting out for Gethsemane.

Later in the New Testament we have references to "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (eg Ephesians 5.19); we are to sing and make melody in our hearts to the Lord.

Philippi

We hear of Paul and Silas, after a thorough beating, and now with their feet in the stocks in prison in Philippi, praying and singing praises to God *at midnight!* (Acts 16.25); and Luke rather gently writes, " – and the prisoners heard them".

You bet they did – they didn't have a lot of choice! What a glorious example for us all: come what may, and a great deal had just come what may, there they were, praying and praising the Lord.

In Revelation 5.9 the four beasts and the twenty four elders around the throne sang a new song to the Lamb, "Thou art worthy".

Christian Hymns

Hymnody became well-established within the Church from its earliest days, and of course we are the recipients of a vast collection of stirring hymns and songs for our edifying today.

The singing of new songs continues in our own generation – some of which will stand the test of time, and some of which will probably not!

In many churches today there is the temptation to concentrate on the new and set aside the old, but that can be very short-sighted.

Some new hymns are clearly strong and true and effective in helping us to worship the Lord aright. Others, it has to be said, are not. Their theology is suspect, their content is banal, their tunes are thin. (For courtesy's sake we will not name names here!).

The Winnowing of Time

Because such hymns and songs are new, the greatest winnower of all in these matters – the test of time – has not had a chance to operate. It is only after a period of, say, twenty years or more that we see the worth of any surviving hymns: the mere fact that they have survived demonstrates their worth!

In view of all this, we do well, in the midst of so much new hymnody, not to neglect the treasure-trove of hymns we possess from previous generations.

Perhaps you have experienced what we have come across sometimes, how there is a great surge of relief and response across the congregation when we are given a fine, rich, familiar old hymn to get our teeth into! — be it rousing or quietly devotional. Think of such hymns as "Love divine" to Blaenwern, "And can it be", "Thine be the glory", "Hark the herald", "Soldiers of Christ arise", "Thy hand O God has guided", "Guide me O Thou great Jehovah"; and on a quieter note, "Be thou my vision", "When I survey", "How sweet the name", "Through all the scenes", and many more.

The value of any hymn or song is not so much in its *age*, but in its *effectiveness* as a vehicle of our worship; and if it is still in the repertoire hundreds of years after it was written, it is probably worth keeping there!

So let us in these disturbing days be people of song to the Lord, be they hymns old or young, known or spontaneous. Alongide our Bibles and other devotional books there can be a place, if it is not there already, for a hymn book. And then just sing! Sing aloud!

We are so fearful that it will sound peculiar, or that we will be overheard, that we can be easily kept chained up in perpetual silence!

So what if it does sound peculiar? – to the Lord it will be a joy!

So what if we are overheard? So much the better! Were Paul and Silas trained opera singers? They probably received a few choice comments and various missiles from their fellow inmates, but what an impact their singing would have had in that grim place of desperate lives.

Indeed we see something of that impact straightaway. Not *one* of those prisoners made a break for it when the earthquake had left the doors hanging off their hinges and the chains hanging off their ankles (verse 28). Think about it! What possible reason could those rough men have encountered which caused them to stay put? It can only have been the cheerful singing of Paul and Silas.

We, above all people, and entirely through the grace of God, have reason always to *sing*.

Let's just do it!

Letter 20 The Promised Land

Hardly a week goes by without us being confronted in the news with the ongoing and seemingly-intractable problems involving Israel and the Palestinians.

This conflict is at the heart of so much misery and bloodshed in today's world. It is so important as Christian people that we understand not only what is going on on the ground, and why, but also the underlying spiritual realites which are so often hidden behind the scenes.

The Land

Close to the heart of the situation is *the land*. It is this land, this Promised Land, which is the symbol of so much for the Jewish people. For it is this land which is the strong, physical, tangible link connecting the Jews of today with their spiritual fathers, to Abraham and Moses and Elijah and all the rest of them.

Some basic research in the Concordance throws up some interesting results. There are nearly 1700 references to "land" in the Old Testament. Not all of these concern "the" land, of Israel, but we see just how central a concept is land in the identity of God's covenant people.

Turning to the New Testament, we find only about 50 references to land. Some of these occur a few times in parallel passages across the Gospels, and about 20 of these are only quotations from the Old Testament anyway.

Even allowing that the New Testament is considerably shorter than the Old Testament, the contrast is stark: the land is a very "big deal" under the Old Covenant, but under the New it simply does not feature at all!

The New Covenant

The reason for this is simple, and very precious: the New Covenant, of which we are members through God's good grace, is *purely spiritual* in nature. Our involvement in this Covenant does not oblige us to live in any particular place, or to belong to any particular racial group. We are members of this New Covenant, whoever we are, and wherever we are, through faith and trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour.

The Jew looks to the Promised Land, and to Jerusalem at its heart. The Muslim looks to Mecca, and to the Ka'aba at its heart. The Christian looks to no physical place as being supremely special in a spiritual sense – for everywhere is special! "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof" (Psalm 24.1).

We are in the presence of the living God, always and everywhere! Nothing shall, or can, ever separate us from that presence, come what may (eg., Romans 8). To put it another way, the Christian is always "in the Temple"!

The Promised Land is Now

We can look at this lovely truth from a further angle. While the physical Promised Land of Israel embodies so much for the Jewish people, Christian people, in a very real sense, have already entered the Promised Land! The physical land of Israel is a "type", a forerunner, of Israel's final state before the Lord. But we have been given such a final state, right here, right now - "eternal life", in all its fulness.

"I am come that they may have life, and that they might have it more abundantly ... And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 10.10 and 17.3). These words demonstrate that, in essence, Christian people have already been given all that there is to be given!

Now of course these spiritual blessings are often obscured in the rough and tumble of daily life; and of course at present we still only

see "in a glass, darkly"; and of course great days will come when our blessings are poured out in all their visible fulness.

But let us never make the mistake of thinking that the Christian walk is one long, lonely slog through this life, with the promise of eventual blessings "somewhere, over the rainbow".

The blessings have been given to us already. They are to be recognised and received day by day. Above all, they are to be *acted upon* day by day – for that is the only way we demonstrate that we really have truly received them!

No wonder then that Paul can write that he has learned to be content (Philippians 4.11). He has learned, the hard way, that *nothing* in our outward circumstances can ever affect our spiritual blessings. He has learned that, in Christ, we are *always* in the Promised Land, the land of God's gracious, provident presence.

Jesus' Tomb

So it is no surprise for example to notice that the Lord's tomb never remotely became a place of pilgrimage in the days of the Early Church.

It was, and is, a place that simply does not matter in itself. What happened there is vital and glorious, but we are freed from any need to visit it.

Bread and Wine

In the bread and wine of the "Lord's Supper", we receive the body and blood of the Lord in *spiritual* form.

There is nothing spiritually special about the bread and wine as such – and indeed there must not be allowed to be – for the essence of the occasion is our *spiritual* reception of the Lord afresh into our lives.

The physical ingredients of this act of worship are merely the outward expression of what is really going on in the inner, spiritual realm.

Relics

Neither are we bothered about bits of the "true cross", or Saint Somebody's tooth, or going on a pilgrimage to wherever, or even the Turin Shroud. (And in case you think such notions were quietly dropped centuries ago: in March 2008 a "Padre Pio Mass" was held in a Roman Catholic Church in Glasgow, at which relics from the body, recently exhumed, were displayed and used for prayers of blessing for the congregation). The great unchanging spiritual realities in which we are privileged to dwell are entirely unaffected by such outward trappings!

This is not to say that a visit to "the Holy Land" is not a real source of blessing for many Christians – for clearly it is. Seeing the actual biblical places at firsthand certainly fills out our understanding. But we must never confuse this with the notion that, by our simply going to these places, we have somehow drawn closer to the Lord.

Seek ye first ...

Do not lay up treasures on earth, the Lord warns us (Matthew 6.19). We are to concentrate instead on treasures in heaven, for that is the "Promised Land" realm which truly matters, and ultimately is the only realm that does matter.

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6.33) is the same truth phrased in a different way. As members of the New Covenant, we are entirely *in* the world, but inevitably are never quite *of* the world. We are pilgrims, sojourners, folk who are passing through, with our feet marching to that different drum, our ears attuned to that different voice, and our eyes drawn always to those distant hills.

Citizenship

Our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3.20), the Holy Spirit tells us through Paul. This was written to residents of the great city of Philippi, which was a colony of Rome. These people were thus used to living in one place – Philippi – but truly belonging, in an earthly sense, elsewhere – in Rome.

Just so for us: we are living here, but we belong "there"! And for as long as we are physically here, we can enjoy all the spiritual blessings here, which have already been bestowed upon us from "over there"!

No Opting Out!

But until we finally get to "there", there is work to be done, right here, and right now. We are Christ-appointed salt, and light. We are to love our neighbours, as tiny expressions of our love for God, and of His love for them. We are to pray for one and all, and especially for those appointed to positions of leadership in Church and State. We are to be generous with our time, money, gifts and homes.

Let there never be any truth in the old jibe "He's so heavenly minded that he's no earthly use"! Thankfully the track record of Christians bringing real benefits to those around them is second to none, and long may it continue.

The Holy Land of Israel is still utterly central to God's dealings with mankind, and in particular to His dealings with His chosen people, the Jews. As Christians, grafted as wild olive branches into the natural tree (Romans 11.17ff), we have a God-entrusted responsibility to pray for Israel and its people, longing as we do for the day when they finally recognise and receive their Messiah. What a day that will be!

Meanwhile, we humbly rejoice that in Christ the Messiah, we, through no merit of our own, have already been given entry to the Promised Land of God's blessings!

May our lives shine forth with that wonderful truth at every step of the way.

Letter 21 Spiritual Bi-Focals!

"Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thessalonians 1.2).

In these rough-tough times we can do a lot worse than simply join in with those words - the wishing of God's grace on one another, and of His peace.

A Bi-Focal Walk

Those words, and the goodwill that lies behind them, neatly encompass a feature that is constant in our Christian discipleship which we can think about this time: that we are all on a "bi-focal walk".

By that phrase we simply mean our task of blending two spiritual dimensions and time frames in our lives: the immediate, local and human with the longer-term, the strategic and the divine. We can sum up these two perspectives as the "here-and-now", and the "there and then".

By wishing one another God's grace and peace, we achieve that blending. For we are hoping that into your situation of the here-andnow, God will be involved with His grace and peace.

It is quite right that much of our attention and efforts in everyday life will be focussed on the here-and-now, on the people and tasks and concerns before us in this day or hour. This is the coal-face, where our lives are actually lived out in the toil and the sweat of each day. We can think of this as like our looking through the close-up part of some bi-focal spectacles, throwing into focus all that is immediate and close to us.

But at the same time God's people have always looked through the there-and-then, far-away part of those spectacles too.

Here we are lifting our gaze up and away from the immediate, the local, the close-by coal-face. Instead we are looking up to the Lord Himself in His glory and holiness. We are also gazing beyond, into the distance, to all that is promised, to all that is yet to be fulfilled.

It is by keeping a balance between the views we see in the two parts of the bi-focal spectacles that we can live in the most effective spiritual ways.

For the lovely spiritual truth behind all this is that while God is certainly in one sense higher and distant and beyond, He is also wonderfully present in the here-and-now by the Holy Spirit, in our very lives and situations! (See for example John 14.26 / 15.26 / 16.7 / I Corinthians 3.16 / 6.19 / II Corinthians 6.16; incidentally we notice that the "you" in each case is plural, the emphasis being on the Spirit within *us* rather than merely in *me*). We are to learn to cope with the here-and-now in the light of God's close presence and resources.

God told Noah, "Make thee an ark of gopher wood Behold, I do bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh But with thee I will establish my covenant" (Genesis 6.14, 17,18).

Thus Noah was shown the far-away view, but was also given the here-and-now task, which was to occupy him and his family for a good few years! It was only by his retaining a view of the far-away that the daily task before him made any sense.

We can turn next to that scene when the Lord showed Abram all the land (Genesis 13.14-17). Lot had just gone his own way, choosing the best parts of the land, and Abram was probably regretting his generosity! (verse 9).

But then the Lord spoke to him. "Lift up your eyes Abram. Whichever way you look, I will give to you and to your seed all the land that you see".

Talk about the bi-focals! At that time Abram and Sarai were childless, yet here was the Lord speaking of their seed becoming too many to be numbered, and all the land that he could see being given to them.

The years passed. Mistakes were made. Isaac was duly born. Sarah died, and Abraham rather pathetically bought just one field in the land that the Lord had promised to him, as a place where he could bury his wife's body. That was the only part of the promised land that Abraham ever owned, and he had had to pay for it too!

We see how this bi-focal principle was worked out in Abraham's life. All the time he was concerned with the everyday needs of life, becoming very prosperous along the way, yet at the same time he always kept in mind the Divine Promises he had been given – a son, and the land. His knowledge of the far-away gave him direction and purpose for the here-and-now.

Moses came across the same bi-focal principle too. At the burning bush (Exodus 3) he was given a glimpse of the far-away: "I am come down to deliver them (the people of Israel) out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey" (verse 8). Quite a prospect!

Then the Lord turned Moses' attention to the rather more immediate – which was not so much to Moses' liking! "Come now therefore, and I will send thee to Pharaoh" (verse 10). Once again we see that Moses was given the glimpse of the far-away, a glimpse that would help sustain him in all the bumps and bangs that lay ahead of him along the road to that faraway.

In the time of the Lord's earthly ministry, He gives us the same bifocal principle. "Seek first the kingdom of heaven", the Lord teaches us (Matthew 6.33); that is, in the hurly-burly of the here-and-now, we are always to retain that awareness of the Higher Beyond.

Later on He tells us to "abide in Him" (John 15), for apart from that abiding, that constant linkage to, and awareness of, the Lord Jesus Christ, we can achieve nothing in the here-and-now that actually counts for anything.

In the years of the growth of the early Church, the Holy Spirit tells us through Paul (Philippians 3.20), that our citizenship is in heaven. That is a present reality for all those in Christ Jesus, but the fullness of that reality is yet to come.

Perhaps the greatest example of the bi-focal principle is to be found in Revelation. In those pages, more vividly than anywhere else in Scripture, we are shown the glories that lie ahead – the certain defeat of all who set themselves against God, and the certain victory of Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain. What glorious scenes! - given to us to comfort and sustain us in the here-and-now.

The Lord does not want us only gazing into the distance, for then we shall not be much use to anyone right now. But nor does He want us becoming so concerned with the immediate that we lose our sense of perspective, direction and purpose, which is so very easy to do.

The fact is, and it is a well-known and old fact, that God's people are always pilgrim people.

We too are on a journey, just like our forebears such as Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Israelites, Jesus and His disciples, Paul, Silas and the others. One day our own particular journeys will be over, for we shall have arrived; and what a day that will be! But until then, on we go, in good heart, with solid faith, and supporting each other.

There is much to be said, at the start of each day, to gaze through those bi-focals into the distance, with all its precious promises; and then in the light of those realities, to look back down into the hereand-now, to sort out what is to be done, in the Lord's name and strength, in this little life, on this particular day.

And then again before we sleep, a lifting of the eyes to those hills once more, a committing of us all into the Lord's hands, a putting of those bi-focals on the bedside table, and a good sleep of trust before the journey continues once more.

Letter 22 Feebleness and Power

"There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fishes, but what are they among so many?" (John 6.9).

The day was hot and dusty, the crowds were hungry and tired. In answer to Jesus' question (verse 5), all they could come up with was the warm, unused picnic of a boy in the crowd! What possible difference could that make?

The times we are living through today have some similarities to that scene above the Lake that day.

Wherever we look we can see that things are not going well. Many people around us are indeed hot, tired and hungry, dashing about from one thing to the next in their lives. We have severe social breakdown; debt, unemployment and redundancies; a loss of trust in the political system; and powerful forces in the media and on the internet doing no-one but themselves any good.

How natural for us to think, "I've only got a couple of proverbial loaves and some sardines — what good are they in the face of all that is going on?".

Powerful and Feeble

Yet this situation of the Powerful being taken on by the Feeble is a strain running right through Scripture!

Remember Gideon and his 300 men (Judges 7), and then poor, foolish Samson crying out for one last gift of strength (Judges 16.30). David defeated Goliath against all the odds (I Samuel 17), and then finally won through against Saul's efforts to destroy him. Elijah challenged the great idolatrous edifice established by Jezebel and Ahab (I Kings 17-18): Ahab ended up with an arrow through his back, and Jezebel as dog food (I Kings 22.34,37, and II Kings 9.10, 33-35).

Then the Messiah was born, in obscure ordinariness beneath the attention of the Powerful.

The Lord grew up in a system dominated by the Powerful. The Romans ruled over all, viciously whenever their sovereignty was threatened. There were puppet kings such as the various Herods, as well as the great religious hierarchies of the day — High Priests and priests, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Sanhedrins and all the rest of them. What place for the ordinary people, one of whom, humanly speaking, was the Lord Himself?

There was very little that the ordinary God-fearing, God-seeking people could actually do to change the situation. They were the ones pushed around by bad people right, left and centre, yet with just an odd picnic in their pockets!

But then Jesus of Nazareth came on to the public scene. He was utterly different from anyone or anything they had known before – compassionate, caring, honest, strong, *good!*

He lived amongst the ordinary people, and loved them. "People like you – poor in spirit, meek, slogging steadily on, doing your best – are the ones who are getting it right, and who are already blessed!".

His kingdom was not of this world. It was a kingdom that did not operate with Bosses and the Bossed. The greatest in His kingdom were the weak, the unnoticed, the downtrodden, the pushed-aside.

The old woman with her tuppence (Luke 21.1ff); the woman with her "issue of blood" pushing through that crowd just to touch His garment (Matthew 9.20ff); the poor soul breaking that box of priceless ointment over Him (Mark14.3ff).

This was dynamite! No wonder they flocked to Jesus wherever and whenever they could.

When the Powerful finally gathered to stop this Man, they were the ones whose weakness and wickedness were instantly exposed. They achieved a dreadful victory of sorts, yet this turned out to be the total defeat of all that dares to strut in the face of the living God. Instead

there was victory, the greatest Victory for us all that there could ever have been.

Pattern and Promises

So we see the pattern, precedents and promises.

The Lord and His people are *always* "up against it", for they cannot but help challenge the world and its ways. It is a great spiritual clash at the very heart of God's creation.

So as we look around us in these difficult days, we can actually be of good cheer – for this is normal! Of course we are feeble, making tiny contributions in the face of all that is going on.

But that is precisely the situation in which the Lord does His work! He didn't want Gideon to crush the baddies with an army of thousands. He didn't want everyone to produce picnic hampers that afternoon by the lake.

Let the glory of the Lord be seen – that the great victories are wrought by His gracious activity! From Day One of His creation, that is how He has worked.

The wonder is that He does choose to make each of us matter. He does give us gifts, and a place and tasks in the Body of Christ, which no-one else can quite fill. Each of us belongs; each of us is unique; and each of us is needed. Even the very hairs of our heads are numbered; we are of more value than many sparrows.

It all adds up to the simple truth that He takes even our little efforts – our small packed lunches - and uses them to make a difference for His kingdom.

We are not to be complacent, sitting back and saying it is all up to Him. But nor are we to be depressed and frenzied, rushing about thinking that it is all up to us.

The fact is that it *is* ultimately all up to Him, but that along the way He catches His children up into His work and puts us to good use.

Philippians 4.4-8 sums it all up. We can be of good cheer, living and working steadily for the Lord. Even our often puny efforts, in His hands, make a difference. In Christ, all shall be well.

Letter 23 The Fiddling of Expenses

The "expenses scandal" grinds on. Each day that passes seems to bring new revelations about the questionable expense claims of this or that MP, and not surprisingly, the political careers of a good number of these MPs have taken a sudden turn for the worse.

The whole matter has become enveloped in anger, mistrust, self-justification and threats of "more to come". The damage being done to our basic democratic systems can only be imagined at this stage, but there can be little doubt that that damage is considerable.

The impending elections, for some local and county councils and for the European Parliament, may well throw up some odd results, as voters use the ballot box to express their pent-up feelings!

"Squeaky clean"

We expect our MPs to be "squeaky clean", and certainly we should be able to trust them to behave honourably on our behalf.

But then we come to the uncomfortable realisation that very few of *us* are squeaky clean! How many of us would relish the incessant intrusion of the media into our behaviour – as many of our MPs have been enduring in these past weeks?

Would we not quickly become defensive and self-justifying? - while loudly insisting that all our actions had been entirely above board.

Unattractive Tendencies!

So we come to realise anew that there are several tendencies within human nature which are really rather unattractive!

The first is a tendency to be less than honest and transparent when it suits us.

The second is to conceal that conduct, and deny it or justify it when challenged.

The third is to peer at everyone else suspiciously, ready to assume that all of them are up to no good – unlike us!

Are we not seeing in this sorry saga of the expenses scandal all three of these tendencies being paraded?

Scriptural Precedent

There are many examples of such behaviour within the pages of Scripture.

Adam and Eve strayed off the path, then tried to hide, then tried to blame anyone but themselves.

Achan kept back some booty after the defeat of Jericho, in defiance of the Lord's instruction (Joshua 6.17 / 7.1ff). It took a defeat and much soul-searching before the wrongdoer was identified and punished.

King Saul was guilty of much the same sin. He ignored the Lord's instruction concerning the Amalekites (I Samuel 15.3), and kept back some of the best animals (verse 9). When questioned by Samuel, Saul announced that this had been done for the very best of reasons – to sacrifice them to the Lord (verse 15). "Whatever could be wrong with that?" we can hear him exclaiming!

But there was everything wrong with that, for the king had disobeyed God, and that was the end of his reign in any meaningful sense. Saul continued on the throne for many more years, knowing all the while that God had turned His back on Him, and had anointed someone other than his own son to succeed him (verse 28).

King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then did his best to bring about the death of her husband Uriah on the battlefield (II Samuel 11). When Nathan the prophet confronted him, David owned up (II Samuel 12.13), but then did all he could to avert his punishment – the death of the child.

In II Kings 5 we read of Naaman the Syrian being healed, and offering Elisha lavish presents by way of thanks (verse 15). Elisha refused, but his servant Gehazi had no such hesitations, concocting a reasonable story to get a share of the presents for himself. He was duly found out, and terribly punished (vv 20-27).

We recall the words of Moses to Reuben and Gad, "...be sure your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32.23). It will, and it does!

Ananias and Sapphira were generous people (Acts 5) – but each of them lied, and those lies cost them their lives.

The Lord Jesus spoke of the time when the words we have spoken in secret will be proclaimed from the housetops (Luke 12.3). Nothing now hidden will remain hidden – a day of exposure of all things will surely come.

These various scriptural precedents and promises are sobering, and rightly so. They serve as a warning and as a signpost, for the conduct of our own lives, and in our attitude towards the lives of others.

For Ourselves

We are to live light-filled lives, beyond reproach, without guile.

There is no place in the Christian life for secrecy, no-go areas or deception. Let our speech be plain, our Yes meaning Yes, and our No meaning No.

We should be able to contemplate being subjected to what we can call "the Tabloid Test" without fear – that is, a thorough and public examination of who we really are and how we really behave, by those who are at best neutral in their attitude towards us.

We are called to be people for whom it can truly be said, "What you see is what you get; and what you see is straightforward goodness".

A Falling Short ...

Now of course, we will certainly fall short of this high calling! Let there be no shock or surprise as we gradually discover more of our true fallen nature.

Rather those discoveries throw into more stark relief just how great is the Father's love for us, His fallen, but redeemed, children.

The pathway of confession and repentance is well-worn. The receiving of His forgiveness is ever-precious.

God the Father knows we are far from perfect – that is really not the "big issue", and He has done all that was necessary to overcome those imperfections.

What He does seek now above all is our *obedience*, the setting of our feeble wills to follow Him, as well as we may, upheld by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Our View of Others ...

Finally there is the often vexed matter of how we are to view one another, both within the Church and beyond it.

The media is having a proverbial field day in pointing fingers at our MPs. As a result much anger has been aroused within the electorate, some of it justified, but some of it not. The fact remains that, hopefully, most MPs, for most of the time, are trying to do their best. Our task is to help them, not kick them down.

So we are called to avoid judging one another, in a wrong, haughty, dismissive sense. That was a habit the Pharisees had developed, and it was a habit which the Lord so strongly rejected.

Let us rather pray for one another, including those set over us in positions of responsibility (eg. Matthew 5.4 / II Corinthians 13.7 / Colossians 1.9 / I Timothy 2. 1-4,8 / et al).

We are to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6.2), and confess our sins to one another (James 5.16).

Awareness and Support

So we see the picture that emerges from God's Word. It is, as always, rounded, balanced and so obviously "right"!

On the one hand we are not to be blind to one another's faults, or surprised by these. We do no one any good by pretending we are not seeing wrong when we plainly are seeing it. Wrong *matters!*

On the other hand, nor are we to rush to the opposite extreme of crying out in disgust when our fellow men and women are seen to have faults. Of course they have faults – for they are just like us!

We see this balance perfectly expressed by the Lord when confronted by the angry crowd bringing before Him the woman caught in adultery (John 8.1-11).

He deals graciously with both wrongs. First He exposes the harsh judgement of the accusers; they leave the scene one by one as they realise that they too are sinners. Then He addresses the woman, with a mercy she did not expect, but with a clear instruction regarding her future behaviour.

Jesus has recognised the various wrongs in the situation, and has dealt with these in a positive way. This is all the more gracious of Him, when we bear in mind that, of us all, He is the One with no sin.

We are all patients; we are all poorly; we all need the healing of Doctor Jesus. As we receive His healing, we are to support one another, for the simple reason that we are all in this together!

We can finish where we began, with our MPs. We need to pray for them, aware of the temptations and shortcomings which afflict us all. We need to communicate with them, encouraging them in the right paths, and dissuading them from the other sorts of path. Let us use our votes in a few days' time, to promote the people and the policies which are most in accord with the Lord and His ways.

For He is still the Doctor; He is still the Remedy we all need.

Letter 24 The Ministry of Encouragement

When the reconnaissance party returned to Moses from their secret visit to Canaan, it was a classic case of "Do you want the good news first or the bad?" (Numbers 13. 26ff)!

The good news was there right in front of them – samples of fruit (v 23) including a branch with one cluster of grapes so big that it took two men to carry it on a pole between them, as well as pomegranates and figs. Surely the land did indeed flow with "milk and honey", as the Lord had always assured them.

"We can't do it"

But then they got to the bad news (v 28) - the inhabitants were strong, the cities were walled and great, and the children of Anak were there.

Now you didn't mess with the children of Anak, or the "Anakims" as they were also called. These were the descendants of "the giants" (v 33, and Deuteronomy 2), and it is likely that they had come originally from the illicit union of the "sons of God" with the daughters of men as mentioned in Genesis 6.2. So quite apart from their physical size and ferocity, there was also something about the Anakim that was spiritually very nasty, indeed perhaps involving the infiltration of the human race by demonic beings. It was little wonder that the Israelites quaked at the news!

The bad news carried the day, despite Caleb's words of encouragement (v 30). Their message came down to, "We can't do it – their lot are stronger than our lot". And of course, in one sense, that was quite true.

Those gloomy words had rapid and serious effect amongst the people. Their moaning instincts broke forth (14.1-5) – Moses and Aaron were blamed for getting them into this mess, Egypt now

seemed very appealing, the Lord was blamed, and they talked about appointing a new leader themselves to take them back to Egypt.

Joshua and Caleb spoke of the Lord (14.6-9), reminding the people of their true priorities, but were about to be stoned for speaking the truth.

Then "the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle" (v 10), and the Lord was not best pleased (vv 11-12). It was only the pleading of Moses with the Lord which averted severe divine judgement (vv 13-39). The people "mourned greatly" (v 39), but then promptly ignored all that the Lord had told them about a forty-year delay, and "carried on regardless", resulting in a military defeat at the hands of Amalekites and Canaanites (vv 40-45) – the very thing which they had feared in the first place.

So all in all, the Lord, Moses, Aaron and the people found themselves in a deep and sudden crisis, which proved to have severe, long-lasting consequences. The crisis arose simply because of some words of gloom, and those words of gloom sprang from the people taking their eyes off the Lord and His promises.

In His Presence

We all do that! Our calling as those seeking to be Christ's faithful sheep is to live out our lives consciously in the Lord's presence. While there will be many times when we are not actually thinking about Him, for we are involved in tasks which take our full attention, we can quickly and instinctively turn to Him at any step of the way. Perhaps it will be a word of thanks, or sorrow, or request. The words may vary, but the habit of conversing naturally and simply with the Lord is there for us to develop.

Such conversing need not be merely one-sided, from us to Him; for the Lord Himself will graciously speak in response, especially if we are in the habit of walking with Him steadily. The likelihood of Him speaking, and of our hearing Him aright, is much reduced if we just "pop in" every few weeks with a "This is what I want and I want it now!"-type shopping list!

"Watch your tongue!"

Let us also learn from the story of the returning spies about what we say and how we say it. God's Word is filled with instruction about our tongues, lips and speech – the basic message being just how easily we can cause real damage through the wrong use of speech.

We can think for example of the Epistle of James, where the tongue is likened to the bit of a horse – a small object controlling a powerful beast; or to the rudder of a great ship; or to the spark that can cause a forest fire (James 3. 1-12).

Whatever the picture used to describe the tongue, we all know the truth about it! How often have we blurted words out in haste, only to regret them bitterly afterwards?

This is another area where, by walking steadily with the Lord, the Holy Spirit can reduce and remove any habits we may have which cause trouble with our speech. He does the changing, and He looks to us to set our will in line with His will and to play our own part.

We will all have come across the old checklist to be used before saying something sensitive: Is it true, kind and necessary? To this we can add a further question, Is it "edifying"? – that is, is this going to build people up, rather than knock them down?

Look at the example of Caleb and Joshua (Numbers 13.30 and 14.6-9) – what a difference those words could have made to anyone "with ears to hear"!

For they drew attention back to the Lord, where all attention ultimately belongs, and urged the people to respond positively in the light of the Lord; in this case, it was a message of "What are we waiting for?"!

Building the House

We can move through to I Corinthians 14, that well-known passage about the proper ordering of Christian worship. Time and again we come across the word "edifying". While the context here is primarily over the issue of tongues, interpretation and prophecy, the principle is

very clear – we must always be concerned to build up the body, rather than to pull it down. One of the main ways in which we build up or pull down is through our speech – what we say and how we say it.

The Greek word translated as "edifying" is all about house-building. So we could read the end of I Corinthians 14.26 as "Let all things be done unto house-building". To put this another way, "Is what I am about to say going to help build the house – or damage it?".

Notice here that the emphasis is not on "me", but on "us", with each individual member of the "us" playing his or her part in the wider situation. This counteracts any tendency to concentrate on "me" and my own well-being, when we can easily assume that the Lord's main task is to ensure my comfort at all times! Instead, He is primarily concerned with His own glory, and with the building-up of His house, His temple, the Body of Christ, on earth. Each of us remains precious, but always as a part of the greater whole.

So this time we have come across two ways in which to counteract the gloom and despondency which are so prevalent today.

Who is Who!

First, we are to remember Who is Who! – the Lord is the Lord, and He reigns, and He cares, and He has given us many promises and principles by which we are to steer our lives. When those spies in Canaan were confronted with a nasty surprise, most of them completely forgot the Lord in their response. Two of them remembered Him, and got their response right.

We too know all about the surprises, be they great or small, that life can put in our path. By way of response, first and foremost we are simply to remember the Lord. We are "in Him", and any particular surprise is also "in Him", and what may be a surprise to us is not a surprise to Him!

Up Not Down

Secondly, let us take constant care with our speech. Most of those spies spread the news of how terrible everything was — and their

words had predictable effects. By contrast the words of Joshua and Caleb were true and edifying, because they sprang from a continuing awareness of the Lord's sovereignty in the situation. If their words had been heeded, life for the people of Israel would have been a great deal more straightforward in the years that followed.

"Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Ephesians 4. 29).

We have the privilege of being members of "God's house". We belong, we are needed, we matter. One of our prime tasks, especially in these times of apprehension, is to keep building that house up, by words of good cheer, faith, truth and encouragement, all backed up by deeds in support of those words.

Letter 25 Orders and Initiative

We are all aware that the armed forces of our country are involved in a fierce and bloody conflict in Afghanistan.

We are becoming used to hearing of the bravery of soldiers who have lost their lives or have received terrible wounds in the course of their duty. Very often we hear that these soldiers became victims themselves because they were trying to help their comrades in trouble.

Whatever else we may feel about this war in Afghanistan, it clearly teaches us some deep spiritual lessons about "laying down our lives for others". Soldiers on the front line are being called upon to risk doing that quite literally, day after day. Especially at this time of annual Remembrance we do well to be profoundly grateful to past and present members of our armed forces, and to uphold all involved in the current situation in our prayers.

This time we will seek to draw a different spiritual lesson which applies to all of us who bear the name of Christ.

Expectations

Two things are expected of the private soldier who finds himself in the battle zone.

The first involves the orders that he and his colleagues have been given. Senior officers have explained to their troops what the plan is, and how it is to be carried out, as far these particular troops need to know. There will have been briefing sessions, with maps, photographs and questions and answers, so that every man in the unit knows the plan and his part within it.

But notice that they are not told *everything* that is in the minds of the Generals, because they do not need to know all that. What concerns both officers and men is that the men have a thorough understanding

of the job that they are being told to do. The broader picture can be left for others to sort out.

The training of each soldier has driven deeply into his character that everything he does is to be done in accordance with those orders he has been given. He is simply to know his orders, and then do his best to carry them out, even at risk to his own well-being.

But then we come to the second expectation concerning each soldier. The plan to take a village or capture an enemy leader is fine in the briefing room, but then reality comes into play!

Things can go wrong, quickly, surprisingly, and perhaps dangerously. A group of soldiers in a ditch suddenly finds that the neat arrows they saw on their maps a few hours ago don't mean very much any more, for the situation has developed in unexpected ways.

What is to be done now? They have their orders, and they have their training — but now they need *initiative!* How are they going to overcome that enemy machine-gun position, which no-one knew about back at base?

It is now up to these front-line troops to draw on their training, to use any resources there may be, to sort out a plan of action within the overall plan – and then to do it.

So often, it is only when faced with such situations that the courage and excellence of our armed forces are fully displayed.

When proud soldiers receive decorations for bravery from the Queen, time and again the citations speak of their selfless courage in the heat of the battle, when they suddenly had to sort things out on their own initiative.

Onward Christian soldiers ...

Now on a much milder scale, mercifully, Christians are soldiers too, in a spiritual sense.

While the more militaristic hymns, such as "Onward Christian soldiers" or "Who is on the Lord's side?" are rarely used these days,

the basic spiritual facts have not changed: there is still a war on, and we need the training and equipment which the Lord provides to serve as His competent troops.

As with conventional soldiers, we need to know the broad plan, as well as the more detailed plan as it affects us. Then we must be ready to use our initiative in the face of the realities on the ground.

Paul

For example, how did Paul actually carry out his faithful work for the Lord? He knew the overall plan, involving the kingdom of God and the Gospel message of salvation by faith won for us by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Particular Orders

He also knew his particular "orders" within that overall plan. He was appointed by the Lord to carry the Gospel message out beyond the Jews to the Gentiles.

Occasionally we read of how the Lord gave him specific orders within the overall plan. In Acts 13.2, we hear of the Holy Spirit setting Barnabas and Saul aside for the specific ministry that He wanted them to carry out. Thus in verse 4, after prayer, fasting and the laying on of hands, the two men set off.

Then in Acts 16.9ff we have the famous vision given to Paul of the "man of Macedonia" asking Paul to come over and help them. Here was a second direct set of orders from the Lord, which Paul and his companions duly responded to.

His Own Initiative

But it is clear that for most of the time, Paul was using his own initiative. This was always within the overall ministry he had been given, and always involving a close, constant prayer life with the Lord.

When he and Barnabas left Antioch, we read that they "departed unto Seleucia, and from thence they sailed to Cyprus" (Acts 13.4b).

But had the Holy Spirit actually told them – "Go down to Seleucia, find the good ship Gentle Waves, and buy two tickets for Cyprus"? This is highly unlikely!

Instead, Paul and Barnabas, perhaps with the others, had prayerfully sorted out a general course of action within the overall plan they had been given by the Lord. They were humbly using their own initiative and taking their own decisons, under the Lord and within His main plan.

So each day that Paul woke up, he did not sit around waiting for the Holy Spirit to tell him specifically what he was to do or where he was to go, that day. That would have reduced him eventually to little more than an unthinking robot. But nor did he spring out of bed and go rushing about on his own initiative, heedless of the Lord's presence and wishes.

A Lovely Blend

His ministry was a lovely blend, on the one hand of obedience to the orders he had been given within the overall plan, and on the other, of a Spirit-informed initiative at the day-by-day level.

Thus when he wrote epistles to the various churches, these involved Paul - faithful, prayerful and Spirit-filled - writing on his own initiative, with words of encouragement, instruction and guidance. Certainly we can see that the Lord was speaking through Paul in these Epistles, and hence they were quickly recognised as being truly "the Word of God", but they did not arise because the Lord had specifically said to him, "Write to the Ephesians this morning".

Mistakes

We can also see that Paul's initiative was by no means always correct! With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that he often got things wrong.

His prayers were not always answered in the way he longed for. He evidently had great plans to go over to Spain, via Rome (Romans 15.24), but it never happened as far as we know.

In Acts 15.36ff, he had a serious disagreement with Barnabas regarding John Mark. These two senior Christian leaders could not agree and went their separate ways: was that what the Lord truly wanted?

Later on, after years of being messed around by the Jews, Felix and Festus, Paul appealed to Caesar (Acts 25.11). All the signs are that this was an impulsive decision on his own initiative, and not one made in response to the direct prompting of the Holy Spirit. Paul himself later admitted that they could well have let him go (Acts 28.18).

But the Lord in His mercy wove this journey to Caesar into His purposes and brought His blessing from it, even though it may not have been His highest will for Paul and the overall ministry of the Gospel.

We have before us in the New Testament such a human picture of Paul. He was tough, courageous, dogged, spiritual, learned, gifted, persuasive, faithful and humble, and throughout the years of his ministry we see these qualities shining through the many initiatives he took to fulfil his God-given calling.

Sometimes he seems to have got things wrong, for he was a fallen, fallible man like the rest of us. But the Lord was never flummoxed by impetuous Paul! - calmly and kindly working things together for good as the situation unfolded.

Today

We today are following on the same path of Christian faith, hope and love. We know the overall plan. We know the more specific plan as it affects us in our own situations. We are open to the specific promptings of the Holy Spirit, as and when He may choose to so prompt.

And meanwhile, within that overall framework, we are bidden to use our own initiative, as Christians growing in the Lord.

Let us be conscious of particular people around us, of relationships, tensions, needs, possibilities.

We can play a positive part, right here and now, as "ambassadors for Christ" (II Corinthians 5.20), in the little ways, with a word, a smile, a prayer, a lift, a meal, a gift, a promise – taking small initiatives within the overall plan.

We often won't be noticed or thanked, and we will never be given medals.

But this is the privilege of our calling as Christ's people. We go on doing this with good cheer, "till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4.13).

What a destination! What a journey!

Letter 26 For or Against?

The way things are going all around us within our society can be rather depressing! - especially for Christian people such as us who are trying to uphold the Lord's ways both in and through our lives.

We have a constant sense of being "on the back foot". The powers-that-be, in politics, commerce and the media, are triumphantly secularist in their approach. Religions are lumped together as being all the same, and all potentially something of a nuisance in an inclusive and "progessive" society. The churches do their best in carrying on their work, often with little encouragement.

To cap it all, the two religious forces gaining the most media attention in the country are Islam and Roman Catholicism, both of which serve up false creeds. The first of these denies the Person and saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the second adds so much to the basic Gospel message revealed to us within the Bible that its message is no longer the Gospel message at all.

For and Against

As we react to what is going on before our eyes, we can ponder two verses from Luke's Gospel recording Jesus' words on two different occasions.

The first comes in Luke 9.50, soon after the transfiguration. John reports to Jesus that they had seen someone "casting out devils" in Jesus' name, but had forbidden him to do this because he was not one of Jesus' known disciples. Jesus' reply is just this - "Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us" (Luke 9.50).

Not long after this (recorded in Luke 11.23), Jesus says precisely the opposite! On this occasion he has just been accused by some of the people of casting out devils "through Beelzebub", the devil. "He that is

not with me is against me" (Luke 11.23) is Jesus' reaction this time.

We are thus confronted with what seems to be a contradiction at first sight. Are those who are not specifically allied to Jesus by faith and loyalty "with Him" or "against Him"?

The Middle Ground

It is a very live question for us these days. We are surrounded by many people living in what we could call "the middle ground". They are not specifically Christian in word or deed, but in many cases they live reasonably good lives and would not regard themselves as "anti" the Christian faith or church. Are we to regard such people as "with us" or "against us"? More importantly, are they with or against Christ?

We have the Lord in Luke's Gospel saying at one time that such people are with Him, but at another time that they are against Him.

This issue crops up regularly, especially in the Church of England, when requests are made for infant baptism, weddings or funerals from families with no regular connection with the Church. Should they be welcomed with open arms with no questions asked, or should the commitments involved in Christian discipleshp be clearly spelled out? The first reaction is strong on welcome and warmth, the second on challenge and expectation!

The way through the apparent paradox is that both of Jesus' statements can apply, but at different times.

Manipulation

Jesus was on the receiving end of such treatment of course. The crowds flocked to Him; people not directly involved with Him used His powerful name to defeat evil forces, and He said such behaviour was acceptable.

But trouble was never far away, and it usually came in the form of criticism of Him from various parts of the ruling elite, the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees or priests.

Regarding such people, Jesus did not hesitate to say that they were in no way for Him, but were clearly against Him.

As the Gospel story unfolds, we see how the crowds in the middle ground were manipulated, to change their attitude towards Him.

Left alone, most of the common people thought Jesus was great, and He was! But whenever "authority figures" were around, the people were silenced out of fear: it did them no good to speak up in favour of Jesus, so they kept quiet and out of the way.

The final twist was the rousing of the crowd to shout "Crucify!" on that fateful morning before Pilate. Barabbas the murderer was released, the Son of God was delivered up to undergo an appalling death. There was no doubting that the people of the middle ground in those awful hours were very far from being "with Jesus".

Britain Today

The same mood-swing within the middle ground occurs in our own society today.

Those of the middle ground have been generally warm and sympathetic to a Christian presence in our own country for centuries. The proportion of "paid-up" Christians within the total population of our country has probably been fairly constant over the years, but from the monarch and the law-makers down, Christian truth and teaching were accepted as the framework in which things should be done and by which they should be measured.

The general populace, while never too keen to "go to church" unless they were forced to do so by their wealthy employers, were involved within this generally-positive attitude to Jesus Christ. Our laws, customs and freedoms are all direct results of this pro-Christian stance.

But at other times, the mood of the people in the middle ground was rather different, and today, for several reasons, we are seeing a definite hostility towards the Christian Faith and all that it represents.

Well-Meaning Attempts

We have just had "Back to Church Sunday", a well-meaning attempt by the churches to encourage people back into the church-going habit. It is too soon to tell if this effort will prove to have been effective.

With regret I fear that it will not be! Just as with the "Decade of Evangelism" of the 1990s which achieved very little, we have to admit that the people of the middle ground in our country these days are very reluctant to express support for the Christian Faith. Ironically many will still claim to be Christians (the stock phrase being "Oh I believe in God and all that") in terms of their personal beliefs, but when it comes to giving open support in front of others, that is a different story!

See how the annual "Christian Aid" appeal has fared over the years. The very name of that appeal is now a significant switch-off for many people. They are happy to support "good causes" of a general nature (think of the astonishing results of the BBC Children in Need Appeal each year) as long as these causes have nothing exclusive about them.

Inclusivity

We are living in times where tolerance and inclusivity are now insisted upon by the authorities, and hence are being increasingly expressed by those of the middle ground. There is now much less latent goodwill towards the Church out there than there used to be.

So far Christian activities remain tolerated in the country, as long as these can be shown to benefit the wider community. We see that the bottom line for those in authority is the whole community. They will allow any efforts which strengthen community, and will come down hard on anything which they feel is going to damage community.

This explains why individual Christians are being singled out by employers whenever their behaviour is deemed to be in any way

"exclusive", ie Christian! - be it wearing a cross, or offering to pray, or upholding Christ rather than Mohammed.

This is what is happening these days, and as Christian people we need to be aware of this, and of the reasons behind it.

It is a time for quiet courage and steady resolve. Our forebears have faced many such times already, often with much greater intensity, as do many of our Christian brethren today in difficult lands overseas.

We are not to fret, because if and when trials do come our way more directly, we know that "Jehovah-jireh" still holds good (Genesis 22.14), "the Lord will see to it", as and when He needs to.

In a way we can think of ourselves alongside Peter, gathered round that brazier in the chill of the night while the Lord was on trial. "You're with Him too aren't you?" may be the none-too-friendly question coming our way sooner or later.

May our reply be prompt and cheerful! "You said it!"

Letter 27 Christian Hope!

It's that time of year again! The arrival of tinsel and jolly Santas in the shops since early November jerks us all back into "Christmas mode" once more.

The television plays its part with twinkling snowmen, soft-focus Christmas trees, blazing log fires, jolly grandparents and photogenic children surrounded by all those wonderful presents. Everyone is having a simply *fabulous* time!

It brings to mind those election results from totalitarian regimes, where it is grandly announced that "99.1%" of the electorate voted for Chairman Whoever. So the vast percentage of people who did *not* vote for the rotter are not only made to feel they are in a tiny minority, and hence must keep very, very quiet; they are also made to feel that everyone else around them *did* vote for him!

Just so with the Christmas myth relentlessly fostered in the shops and on the television. The truth is that Christmas can be a very difficult time for large numbers of people, for all sorts of reasons, and this is made worse by the feeling that behind every other window in the land, everyone else is having the time of their lives! It's nonsense.

From our Christian point of view, we can see that the whole thing is totally bogus, and totally Christ-less.

Simplicity!

We do well to be untouched by all the expectations thrust upon us to throw money around at this time of year, often indeed, money which we may not actually have.

At Christmas we of course give thanks to God the Father for the birth of His Son into this fallen world as one of us, yet without sin. This giving of thanks can be done, indeed should be done, in simple ways.

We can bless the Lord, and receive the blessing of the Lord in return, without having to splash out wildly on this, that and the other.

"Humble prayer and fervent praise" with our fellow Christians; simple acts of kindness to one another; a special meal of thanksgiving; time spent together around the jigsaw puzzle (much more harmonious than the Monopoly board!); happy walks through the fields – all these can have their place in keeping Christmas simple, special and Christcentred.

Advent

But before all that, we have the season of Advent.

The world omits Advent because it gets in the way of the Christmas razamatazz (the only exception being the hijacking of Advent Calendars to sell whatever product they can think of).

Even the churches often blot it out too, with the plethora of Christmas concerts and services being held from early December. The result can be that we are already rather weary with "O come all ye faithful" and the like by the time that Christmas Day finally arrives!

We do well to give Advent its due attention though, especially as with each year that passes we can see that things are gradually hotting up to some sort of conclusion. Advent (literally, "coming to"), obliges us to ponder the various "comings-to" of the Lord God into this fallen world.

While inevitably Christ's birth at Bethlehem tends to be a focal point of Advent, it would be wise for us to concentrate elsewhere this time round. For the Lord has made plain in His Word many events that are to happen in times to come (which we considered in detail in our "Be Strong in the Lord" articles earlier in the year).

The Tribulation

Notably, He has told us of a 7-year period of "great tribulation" coming on the earth, a time of judgement primarily upon the Jews for their rejection of Christ their Messiah at the time of His first coming.

All people still on the earth will be involved in these years of tribulation.

This time will be ended by the visible return of Christ in glory and triumph. He will defeat His enemies, save His people the Jews, and establish His millennial Kingdom on earth. In those great days, every knee shall finally bow, and every tongue shall finally confess, that Jesus Christ IS Lord, and all those who have flaunted themselves against Him down the generations will be set aside for judgement.

Before this dreadful period of the tribulation, the Lord will remove His redeemed people from the earth in what is termed "the Rapture" - the taking of the Church, the Bride of Christ, by her Bridegroom Christ into heaven (eg I Thessalonians 4.13-18).

Now this Rapture can occur at any time. That indeed has been the case for nearly two thousand years, but the days we are living in now are clearly unprecedented within the history of the world.

Humanity is facing increasing, huge and intractable problems (such as global warming and climate change; population growth; a widening and massive gulf between rich and poor; a threatened shortage of vital resources such as water, food and oil; nuclear proliferation; global terrorism; financial chaos - quite a list!). At the same time, forces ranged against Christ, either overtly or covertly, are on the loose, and Christ too often is being set aside amongst the political decision-makers around the world. The whole approach seems to be, "We will crack all these problems OURSELVES!". Really?

The Lord has seen that approach many times before, and mercifully is unfazed by it. He quietly carries on bringing His will to pass, and the next great expression of that will is the Rapture; and a glance through the New Testament will make it very clear what the Lord expects of us in the mean time.

"Patience of Hope"

In I Thessalonians 1.3, the Holy Spirit tells us how Paul is praying for that little Christian community. Like so many other young churches of those days, these Christians were "going through the mill" at Thessalonica, facing persecution, hardship and suffering; life was far from pleasant and far from easy, and many of their trials were directly attributable to their faith in Christ. If they abandoned Christ, life would suddenly become much easier - but they had no intention of abandoning Him.

Paul is praying for them. He always gives thanks for them (v 2), and he remembers, "without ceasing" three vital features of their Christian lives (v 3);

- their work of faith;
- their labour of love;
- their patience of hope.

There is a great deal of help within those words for us today.

Look at Paul's prayer habits – he is always at it! He struggles in prayer for all these little churches and their people. Communications are difficult; Paul is very busy with his own daily ministry of preaching and teaching anyway; he is often getting attacked himself, yet here he is, praying for these folk and all the others, always and without ceasing.

And then look at the qualities he gives thanks for amongst the Thessalonian Christians.

First comes their "work of faith". They are hanging on in there, slogging away, believing, trusting, following, serving – and this all adds up to a "work". There is effort here, resolve, determination, tiredness, but they are keeping at it.

Then he mentions their "labour of love". Again we are in the realm of work and effort, as they doggedly love one another through thick and thin. In the midst of the hardships, they are not just retreating into their shells to protect their own interests. They are labouring at looking beyond self, putting first the well-being of others, their brothers and sisters in Christ.

And thirdly he praises their "patience of hope". What a rich phrase that is! We are not too good at "patience" these days. We tend to assume that everything and anything we may want should be

attainable right here, right now, and if that is not happening, then we can easily find ourselves murmuring at the Lord as to why He is not stepping in to supply what we are after.

The Greek word translated here as "patience", ("hupomonay"), is translated elsewhere in the New Testament as "enduring", "patient continuance" and "patient waiting". We get the drift! The Lord's time-frame so often is very different from ours, and we are wise to remember that fact before shaking small fists in His direction.

The Thessalonians are not just being praised for their patience, but for their patience of *hope*. That word "hope" explains their patience! Christian hope is far stronger than today's idea of having our "fingers crossed".

Christian hope is that sure, settled, fixed, unwavering **certainty** that in Christ, all shall be well. It was this certainty amongst that little Christian community, whose members were being attacked in horrid ways from all sides, that kept them going. They **knew.** That *knowledge* gave them their *hope*, and that *hope* gave them the ability to be *patient* when the object of their hope was taking longer to be fulfilled than they would choose.

None of these spiritual truths has altered one jot since the day of Paul and our Christian forebears at Thessalonica! How good it would be today if we could also be praised for our work of faith, our labour of love and our patience of hope in our own generation. For such qualities are needed as much as ever, both within Christ's Church and beyond, in this mixed-up world.

So in these days of Advent we can take stock of ourselves spiritually, that we may be found ready and faithful in our labours of love when the time of reckoning comes.

And when Christmas itself comes, as the tills fall silent for a few hours, we can celebrate with those around us in the old, simple, real ways, as we humbly give thanks afresh for the Father's precious gift to us all, of Emmanuel, "God with us", Jesus Christ the Lord. No wonder we are called to be His people of faith, love and hope!

Letter 28 Patience!

We read in Genesis 24 that Abraham was by now an old man, "well stricken in age" as the A.V. puts it (v 1a), and there will be times when we know just how he felt! Yet truly "the Lord had blessed him in all things" (v 1b). Abraham could look back over a long life of faith and obedience, of adventure and blessing.

Years before he had been promised wonderful things by the Lord.

In Genesis 12. 1-3:

- a great nation would be made from him
- the blessing of God upon him
- the gift of a great name
- he himself would be a blessing to others
- all the families of the earth would be blessed through him
- and God would in turn bless those who blessed Abraham and his seed, and would curse those who cursed that seed.

Then in Genesis 15.1-7:

- · God would be his shield and great reward
- Abram would father a son himself
- his seed would become as numerous as the stars
- God had brought Abraham forth from Ur to give to him the land of Canaan as an inheritance.

The gift of the land was sealed with a covenant (15.18).

Then in Genesis 17 the covenant was emphasised, despite the folly of Sarai and Abram over poor Hagar (Chapter 16):

- Abram would be a father of many nations
- He was given a new name Abraham, "father of many nations", which as far as God was concerned, Abram already was! (v 5b)
- he would be fruitful, the father of nations and kings

- the covenant would be everlasting
- the gift of the land was to be an everlasting possession
- circumcision was given as the outward sign of the covenant
- Sarai elderly, barren and ground down would be renamed Sarah, "Princess"
- Sarah herself would bear Abraham a son.
- Sarah herself would be the mother of nations and of kings.

What a list of promises! Surely God had blessed Abraham and Sarah, culminating in the birth of their very own son, with his God-appointed name Isaac, "laughter" (17.19).

And now, after the dreadful test on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22) and the death of his beloved wife Sarah (23.1-2), Abraham had one more concern – the finding of a suitable wife for Isaac.

For many years Abraham and Sarah had dwelt in the promised land of Canaan. They had become wealthy, respected and settled. But it was still only a land of *promise*. Abraham had owned not one acre of Canaan, until he bought the field of Machpelah as a burial plot for the body of his wife (23.3-20).

Halfway House

All down those years it means that he was living in a sort of "halfway-house" state.

On the one hand he held in his heart, with patient faith, all the promises that the Lord had given to him. Over the years he had seen some of those promises being fulfilled before his own eyes, notably the birth of Isaac.

But equally, he was very conscious that the land in which he dwelt was not yet his own land, and more particularly, the people amongst whom he dwelt were not his own people.

We see something of the same in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Himself later on. The Lord truly dwelt among us, but He was evermindful that His real roots still lay elsewhere.

The Church and its people have always experienced the same thing. We are thoroughly *in* the world, but yet we are not quite *of* the world.

So here is a significant spiritual theme, which can often affect God's people wherever they happen to be.

We know something of how Abraham felt. He knew that the heir of God's promises was to be Isaac rather than Ishmael (21.12), and so a wife for Isaac was to be found, not from one of the local Canaanite families, but from Abraham's own country and kindred (24.4).

After all these years, Abraham still regarded Ur as "his own country" – the place where he truly belonged. That little fact tells us so much about Abraham as a man of faith and obedience.

We look back from today and say, "Wasn't God wonderful to Abraham!". But if Abraham had been asked at the time, he would probably have replied that a life in Ur of the Chaldees amongst his own people would have suited him just fine.

"The Lord God of his master Abraham"

There then follows in Chapter 24 the gentle story of Abraham's servant setting out on this great journey to Mesopotamia.

He was a faithful servant to Abraham, and had obviously learned from his master over the years about the living God whom Abraham served, but he seems to have had no personal knowledge of Him for himself.

Hence his humble prayer (v 12) was addressed to "the Lord God of his master Abraham". He sought for good speed for himself that day, and for God's kindness upon his master Abraham.

And the Lord answered those simple prayers promptly and beautifully.

The story gradually unfolds, and ends with the lovely scene of Isaac and Rebekah seeing each other for the first time "in the field at eventide" (v 63).

As those seeking to be Christ's faithful sheep these days, we find ourselves living in a society where we can feel less and less "at home".

But this is our home, and there is still much more right with it than wrong with it! It is where the Lord in His mercy has placed us, and where He bids us shine and work and worship and serve.

We do this when noticed and unnoticed, when thanked and when unthanked. Like that servant travelling over to Mesopotamia, our simple concern is to promote the interests of our own Master, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Abraham went home to the Lord - a far truer and better home than Ur of the Chaldees! - years before the promises over the land of Canaan were fulfilled.

We too live in an era of promises which are yet to be fulfilled. But like Abraham we "trust and obey", knowing that in God's good time, each of them will be fulfilled, meticulously!

The Lord will come for His own in the Rapture, taking His Church-Bride "into His tent", just as Isaac took his own bride Rebekah.

The Lord will come in glory and judgement after the Great Tribulation. The Lord will reign in His millennial kingdom here on this earth, and finally, in terms of time, the new Jerusalem and the eternal state will be brought in.

In Christ, all is well. In Christ, all shall be well.

May the Lord bless and keep you all, now and always.

Letter 29 Seeing and Not Seeing

The crowds were so great that day on the lake shore that Jesus spoke to them from a fishing boat moored off the beach (Matthew 13.1-15 and parallel passage in Mark 4).

Interestingly we are told in passing that Jesus *sat* as He taught them (Matthew 13.2). This was no great shouting rant by some political rabble rouser – a large dose of which may be heading our way in the next few months! Instead we are given this lovely picture of the Lord, seated and relaxed, talking to the gathered crowds about the Kingdom of God.

He used parables of course, and we have always been told that parables are "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning", which help us to understand more easily. That definition is quite right as far as it goes, because simple pictures are indeed effective in giving us understanding and in helping us to remember.

But there is rather more to Jesus' parable-telling than that definition acknowledges. Now many of us will have grown up with Jesus' parables since our pram days, and hence we just take them for granted, but for Jesus' listeners that day by the lake, these parables were something new and strange.

We are given the first clue that there is rather more to this parabletelling than meets the eye in verse 9, where we have the Lord's frequently-used expression, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear". The clear implication of this is that some do have such ears – and some do not.

Then in verse 11, in response to the disciples' question (verse 10) as to why He used parables – a strange question to our ears today – Jesus explains that He does so to ensure that "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" shall remain hidden from many of His hearers.

To some, it is given that they should know these mysteries, but to others it is not given, and in the following verses Jesus quotes from Isaiah to explain this deep truth further. This opens to us the old, difficult questions about God's calling and election, and also emphasises the reality of His judgement. The Isaiah passage speaks of this spiritual blindness having come on to the people as a consequence of their behaviour, and also therefore as a terrible judgement. But even in the midst of these solemn words there are words of hope (verse 15b): at any time the path of conversion and healing remains open.

"A great gulf fixed"

Now this remains a vital if neglected truth for the Lord's people in our own generation today as we go forward into this new year.

It means that not everyone around us today is *capable* of receiving the basic spiritual truths of the Christian Gospel; for whatever reason, they simply do not have those vital "ears to hear" at present.

Once pointed out, this is seen to be a very significant piece of the jigsaw puzzle! – for do we not find this basic truth in so many ways in our daily experience? Have we not become so used these days to there being virtually no interest at all in Christian things that we are no longer surprised by this?

As an example of this, it is worth considering the various Christmas services we will have been to over the past few weeks. Hopefully the attendance still rises significantly on these occasions, but we do well to ask some basic questions. Who exactly comes to these services? Why? Why don't they tend to come more regularly? And crucially, what spiritual benefit may they have gained, as far as we might be able to judge?

For we are all well aware that a "great gulf fixed" (quoted from Luke 16.26) now exists between "church" and "non-church" in our society. Churches, quite rightly, do their best to bridge that gulf, but it remains very hard work! And part of the reason for the hardness of the work is this simple truth, that for many around us these days they do not have those ears to hear, so that Gospel truths are a closed book.

So what is to be done about this, by people like us today?

The precious seed

In Matthew Chapter 13 the parable of the sower (vv 3-9 and 18-23) gives us the lead, with the vital message that in one sense the blindness of the people is to make no difference at all! Our calling remains constant: the Lord entrusts some responsibility to us today in the sowing of His precious seed of the Kingdom. We do this through our own lives, what we are are, what we think and say and do; how we spend our time, our energies and our money; who we mix with; our habits; our homes; our families, our priorities, our demeanour. We are to be fitting ambassadors for Christ, easily said, but often hard to live up to, but that is our calling, our responsibility – and our extraordianry privilege.

The Kingdom seeds which the Holy Spirit will be graciously sowing through such lives will fall all over the place. Many will achieve nothing at all as far we can see, but a few, please God, will prove to be highly effective, bringing forth that rich, precious harvest.

But throughout, where the seeds happen to fall, and what the seeds happen to produce, are simply not our problem! The Lord has His responsibilities, and, within those, He has given us some miniresponsibilities. He expects us to get on with those. The fact is that new birth, regeneration, conversion, coming to faith and salvation – all these various terms describing the wonderful process of a soul being saved by faith in Christ – remains ultimately a spiritual work, beyond mere human contriving. We have a part to play, but it does not all depend us, and we must never end up thinking that it does.

In the parables of the sower and of the wheat and tares, the Lord tells us clearly that we are in times of mixture, confusion and variety, culminating eventually in judgement. But the spiritual work goes steadily on, leaving the spiritual results, and the matter of judgement, to the Lord Himself.

The other parables in Matthew 13 also help us to understand the realities of Kingdom proclamation in today's generation.

Those of the mustard seed and the leaven in the meal (vv 31-32, and 33) further remind us that this work is often small, hidden and gradual, and the great changes that do come about are not wrought by us, but by spiritual processes quite beyond us.

The message of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (vv 44 and 45-46) is just what we need as we enter into a long, cold January! Our membership of the Kingdom of heaven is *unutterably precious*, so much so that nothing else in our lives comes close to it in terms of value.

Dung!

We remember much this same truth given to us by the Holy Spirit through Paul later on, such as "For to me to live is Christ, to die is gain" (Philippians 1.21), and, "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him(Philippians 3.8-9). Paul's use of the word "dung" is rather graphic, and is meant to be! When we consider that Paul regards all the privileges and benefits he had enjoyed in his upbringing and early adult life as being no more than a pile of horse muck in the road when compared with his knowing Christ, we get the message! – and the same is just as true for us.

So, a very happy and blessed New Year to one and all! It is 2010 *AD – Anno Domini*, "the year of the Lord". By God's grace and calling, we have been given ears to hear, and access to the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven, focussed in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour.

Not for us the sitting in a fishing boat teaching great crowds about the Kingdom of God, but in our own small ways, we are engaged in just the same work as was the Lord that day on Galilee's shore. We play our part with good cheer and in good heart, while knowing that the Lord in His patient mercy is always playing His.

Letter 30 Obedience to God and Men

When Jesus' followers were filled with the Holy Spirit on that wonderful morning in Jerusalem (Acts 2), nothing could prevent the Good News of the Risen Lord from being proclaimed to one and all!

Crowds gathered in wonderment (verse 6), and Peter spoke to them of "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you ..." (verse 22). Peter spoke bluntly of how Jesus had been crucified and yet had been raised from the dead, and was now exalted at the right hand of God (vv 23, 32, 33). We read that an astonishing 3,000 people were baptised that day (verse 41) by way of response to what they had seen and heard.

And so it goes on. The early chapters of Acts tell of glorious times for the new young Church. There was continuous praise, real fellowship and eager discipleship (eg, Acts 2.42-47). There were miraculous healings, powerful sermons, and thousands of baptisms. What is more, the people of the Church had "favour with all the people (2.47). Our Christian forebears of those times had literally never had it so good!

Sourness

But then things began to change. The first minor note of sourness had come on that morning of Pentecost, when a few in the crowd had mocked the tongues-speaking disciples for being drunk. Their mocking was quickly stifled by Peter's stirring explanation.

But in Acts 4.1 the religious authorities enter the narrative for the first time – and as we see so often in Scripture, religious authorities tend to mean bad news for the Gospel! Sure enough, the disciples were arrested and held in prison overnight (verse 3).

This was suddenly a scary time for the leaders of the young church. We all have the benefit of hindsight, but for them they were entering a dangerous time of unknown, facing serious confrontation with those

in power. Anything could have happened. Only weeks before they had watched their Lord suffer terribly at the hands of men like these – and now it seemed that it was the turn of His followers to "face the music".

No fear

But once again, when the need arose, Spirit-filled Peter spoke up clearly and bluntly before these powerful, angry men (Acts 4.8-12).

There is not a trace of fear here! This is all the more remarkable when we remember that only weeks before, within a mile of where he was now, Peter had been gibbering on about not even knowing Jesus! If ever we needed an example of the transforming power of the Gospel, we have it right here.

And what had happened to transform Peter? He knew! He *knew*, to the depth of his being, and to his very last breath if necessary, that Jesus was truly the Christ. Peter had repeatedly seen his risen Lord, had talked with Him, had watched Him, and now knew beyond the slightest shadow of doubt that Jesus Christ was Lord.

No wonder then that he could look round on these powerful, educated, hard-faced men – and wipe the floor with them.

Look again at his glorious words in verses 10 - 12. These men had never been spoken to like this before, by anyone, let alone by a rough, up-country *fisherman*!

No wonder they had the proverbial "mouthful of teeth" (vv 13ff). Yet they realised that there was absolutely nothing they could do. A great miracle had been publicly wrought at the entrance to the temple; the people were praising God; and now these leaders had been told that the miracle had been wrought "by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" – a man they had recently had crucified.

So they resorted to bullying and threats – that was all they could do in the situation, and at least it was what they were good at.

Peter and John responded to the threats with another unassailable reply – "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (verse 20).

God's single and unique answer

Now today we are living in very different times. The Church no longer has that vibrant cutting edge that it had in those early days. Its very success and power over the past two thousand years has meant that it is deeply entrenched within the "warp and woof" of society. Being a Christian is comparatively easy and can be kept very discreet!

But we are entrusted with just the same Gospel as in those early days — and we only have that privilege at all because of the faithfulness of countless Christians who have trod this way before us.

These days we are all aware that the old spiritual struggle, which surfaced so dramatically in New Testament times, is hotting up once more in our own land.

We are experiencing a government which is avowedly un-Christian in its programmes, and in some cases is downright anti-Christian. A Conservative government is unlikely to be very different, for the whole mood of the age has become one of tolerance and inclusivity. In such an atmosphere there can clearly be no place for any talk of Jesus Christ being God's single and unique answer to humanity's problems.

The Lord Jesus always has been a stumbling block for many, and in our day there He is once again, still placed right in the middle of the road for people to trip over and become very annoyed with. That is just what is happening, and the people in power are determined to cow His people into silence. We really are in times of Acts 4.18 all over again — "they commanded them not to speak at all in the name of Jesus".

As the Book of Acts unfolds from Chapter 4, we know that life did get very difficult for many Christian believers, as the "powers-that-be" did their best to destroy the young Church. Stephen was stoned to death as young Saul of Tarsus looked on (Acts 7-8.1), and then James was

put to death by Herod (Acts 12.2); many other martyrdoms followed, including ten of Jesus' twelve original disciples.

Yet finally, all was well. The Lord and His people won through, in the face of all the odds, all the threats and all the persecutions. Their opponents, in whatever shape or form, simply passed away. Where are those High Priests now, or the Herods or the Roman Emperors?

That has always been the Lord's way, and always will be till His Kingdom comes.

We too are now entering an era of confrontation with those in political power. If or when we are forced into having to decide between obedience to the Lord or obedience to the State, the decision is clear, as Peter and John have shown (also at Acts 5.29). Let us hope that Christian sense prevails in Westminster so that things don't reach that stage, but if they do, we know what response we must make.

Meanwhile we continue to serve the Lord as His salty, light-filled ambassadors as well as we are able, and that includes pulling our weight as first-rate citizens in today's muddled and needy society.

The Faithful Sheep Pastoral Letters

Strength and Encouragement for the Christian Flock

Oliver Bayley

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