

HOME WORSHIP for OCTOBER 2021 by REVD BRUCE JARVIS

Introduction. This month we shall be focussing our worship on the theme of **Kingship**, drawing our readings and teaching from the Old Testament, principally from the books of Samuel and Kings. We shall draw lessons which should help us become more aware of just what is ruling and guiding the way we live. From Samuel through to Solomon, we shall find plenty to inspire us and cause us to reflect.

SUNDAY 3rd OCTOBER – OUR NEED FOR A KING

Readings 1 Samuel 8; John 14:1-15

All the elders of Israel ... came to Samuel at Ramah ... and said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king to judge us like all the nations." [1 Samuel 8:4-5]

Samuel was not best pleased with this request, but when he complained to the LORD he was told to listen to the people, and to realise that it was not him who was being rejected but the LORD. In so many ways, this is what the Children of Israel had been doing ever since being released from slavery in Egypt. As you will have seen from the reading, Samuel relayed the LORD's warning of the consequences that would follow the appointment of a king, but the people refused to listen. When he told this to the LORD, the response was unequivocal: *"Listen to them and give them a king."*

Like the whole of the Sacred Scriptures, this period of Israelitish history paints vivid pictures for us of our personal growth and development. After a long time of domination and servitude in Egypt, following the earlier comfort and prosperity in Joseph's time, the people were released to spend forty years wandering in the wilderness before the LORD's promise of entering Canaan – the land flowing with milk and honey – was fulfilled. As we know, throughout that time the people's trust in their Divine rescuer ebbed and flowed, with disobedience and complaints surfacing all too often. But even after crossing the Jordan River, even after capturing towns and cities, even after victories in battles under Joshua's leadership, still the people and their leaders could not maintain a truly faithful commitment to and trust in the Lord their God.

The moving story of Samuel's birth, his mother Hannah's devotion to the LORD, Samuel's call as a boy during the hours of darkness, and later his service as a prophet and leader of Israel, all capture the human imagination, and point to one of those periods in our life when the Lord is able to speak with us, to touch something deep and previously unknown in us, so that we find ourselves hearing Him and His Word in new ways. As with our Lord's development during his childhood and youth, the literal sense gives us only sketchy details, so how wonderful it is that the Lord has revealed so much more in the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church. And, of course, equally striking is Samuel's selection of the shepherd boy David to be Saul's successor, the King Saul having shown by his actions to be a flawed sovereign.

Samuel's leadership of Israel as a judge took on a very different nature from that of his predecessors, whose role had largely been to conquer the nations inhabiting Canaan. The Book of Judges ends with this statement: *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in his own eyes*, a philosophy of life which we commonly see around us today. Despite military successes, the Israelites disobeyed the LORD in so many ways, by accepting the gods of the local nations, by setting up places of worship on mountain tops, by erecting Asherah poles as objects of worship, and by intermarriage with their enemies, all in direct opposition to what the God of Israel had commanded. It would be Samuel's mission not to fight physical battles but to lead Israel once again to worship the one true God of heaven and earth, and once more to become obedient to His commandments.

The lessons for human life and for personal spiritual growth towards heavenly life abound in these stories. How hard do we find it to be truly loyal to everything we believe in. We may utter the desire and commitment in words, but managing to remain faithful in every thought and action of our waking life is beyond us. The thing is that we know we are going wrong at times. This is the intended role of the conscience, and of the people around us. We can hear ourselves crying out for clear guidance, for ruling principles to show us what to do and how to live. We yearn for a king! The reality, however, is that it is only through our failures, and then the recognition of them, that we can become truly strong and more faithful to the God we love. Let us not become despondent, but throw our trust on the Lord, who never deserts us, and who constantly calls us to Him.

Prayer. *Heavenly Father, our Saviour and our King, grant that we may have the strength and inspiration to follow ever more closely the Divine laws of Your Holy Word, putting to one side the lures and attractions of this natural,*

temporary world. May our hearts and minds be ruled only by love for your kingdom and for our brothers and sisters. Amen.

SUNDAY 10th OCTOBER – DO WE REALLY WANT A KING?

Readings: Deuteronomy 17:14-20; Mark 10:35-45

Our Old Testament reading this week takes us back to the Book of Deuteronomy, the words spoken by Moses to the people of Israel in the desert to the east of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. It was in the fortieth year after leaving Egypt. The book is partly a law book, restating laws given previously, along with the historical record following on from Numbers through to Moses' death in the final chapter, and the appointment of his successor Joshua. Along with these are exhortations to his people, among them our reading in Ch.17, where Moses tells the people what to expect from a king. Having read last week's extract from 1 Samuel 8, you will see that the concept of kingship was foreseen by the Lord; He knew that His children would eventually be seeking a king. What is more, His unique Divine foresight meant that He knew the troubles that the kings would bring, both upon themselves and upon their people.

What is it, then, that we men and women must experience as we develop and grow in spiritual stature? Let's remind ourselves of the pattern laid down in the Word where God's people experience successive forms of leadership. In the early phase it is the patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons – who are the leaders. They are succeeded by the priests, who in turn give way to the judges. The stories that accompany these figures depict a gradual decline from the simplicity of infancy and childhood to a more external and imperfect state, that of adolescence and early adulthood. Perhaps we can begin to see how we all go through this pattern, all under the provision and guidance of a loving and wise Heavenly Father. It's something we cannot avoid. In our infancy and early childhood, we are in a state of simple obedience. We are ruled by our loves, and generally we are obedient to those who have charge over us. It is a state of innocence. But it's not long before signs of rebellion begin to show, and we demand what we want or wish to do.

Gradually, we move from that state of innocence to one in which we yearn to be governed by our reasoning powers, working from principles we acquire from our elders. It is a necessary descent that we can see so obviously when we observe youngsters. Without the introduction of rules and guidelines we would be swept away by an uncontrollable avalanche of natural desires. As time passes, our mind develops the capacity to begin to enter into the light of heaven, and higher truths begin to influence the way we behave and form our values.

But this process still has a long way to go. The Divine provision and permission of this descent must allow us to find ourselves, and form our inner character. Leadership by the priests and judges morphs yet again. Neither Eli's nor Samuel's sons are able to provide the leadership needed. They have become corrupt, and a new way must be found. Remember, our Heavenly Father always has the eternal end in view, which is for us to become fit to enter the kingdom of heaven, a choice which we must make because that is what we want. At that time, it is a king we want, a principle that can make us strong and prosperous, able to overcome our enemies and become powerful – like other nations, or in our case like other people we admire.

Alas, this principle is not quite what it seems to be. Well, shall we say it usually doesn't do for us what we want. The Lord through Moses warned the children of Israel to be careful about the king they would choose. Samuel, too, gave the Israelites a stark warning of the consequences of wanting a king. The people were undeterred. *Give us a king so we can be like all the other nations, they cried. Listen to them and give them a king, said the LORD.* (1Samuel 8:19-22)

It is such a strong pull in us to want to be successful, even to be in charge of others, to have power. Even the Lord's disciples were not free of this desire. Jesus had to remind James and John and the other disciples that true greatness involves service. (Mark 10:41-45) The challenge for each one of us is to learn to recognise the symptoms of what is happening to us, to seek the Lord's help in moving us onwards and upwards, so that what rules our whole life becomes based on love for Him and the life of heaven.

Prayer. *We pray, Lord, for our world, that leaders may emerge who have in their hearts only the welfare and happiness of their people. We pray, too, that we may seek first the kingdom of heaven in all things, trusting that the Lord will provide for all our needs. Grant us peace, Lord, the peace that passes all understanding. Amen.*

SUNDAY 17th OCTOBER – KING SAUL
Readings: 1 Samuel 10; Luke 6:27-42

The first king of Israel came from the tribe of Benjamin. The young man Saul and his servant were sent by his father to search for some donkeys who had got lost. While searching fruitlessly, the servant suggested they consult a prophet (Samuel) who was in the city of Zuph. The LORD had told Samuel he would send a young Benjamite man to him, who he was to anoint king of Israel, and this is what happened.

Our reading gives the essence of what happened to Saul. Particularly powerful is verse 6, where Samuel tells Saul he will be changed by the Spirit of the LORD into a different person. Three verses later we read: *God changed Saul's heart*. When Samuel told the people who had been chosen to be their king, Saul had to be brought out of hiding. The opening verses of Chapter 9 describe Saul as *an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites – a head taller than any of the others*. At 10:24, Samuel introduced him, saying, *Do you see the man the LORD has chosen? There is none like him among all the people*. Then the people shouted, *Long live the king!* The chapter closes with the comment that not everyone respected their new king.

The story in 1 Samuel tells us that despite the people's clamour for a king, their LORD would not reject them because *he was pleased to make you his own*. (1S12:22) Saul reigned over Israel from the age of 30 for 42 years, and had military successes. Behind the scenes, though, Samuel remained as the spiritual leader of Israel, and had to do so as the unseen conscience of the nation. It was only when things had reached such a low point under Saul, and Samuel had anointed David to be Saul's successor, that Samuel could leave the scene. Saul's tendency to go his own way meant that, in the end, his family could not retain the crown and throne. His arrogance was what brought about his decline and eventual downfall. When Samuel confronted Saul with his disobedience, the king confessed his sins. Samuel never again met with Saul, and the narrative shows us evidence of the king's decline in the way he treated his son Jonathan and David, who had served him faithfully from his youth. Indeed, such was the depth of his jealousy, he attempted to murder David on several occasions. By contrast, David resisted the temptation to kill his king when he had the opportunity. The final chapter of 1 Samuel describes the sad end of Saul's life.

That is a rather inadequate summary of Saul's life. The story of the first king of Israel is certainly packed full of drama! But what does it tell us about our own spiritual journey? From being an historical epic, what can we draw from it that will illuminate and guide us as we grow into maturity, and begin to discover more about ourselves? In previous weeks we have thought about how the Word is showing us that we men and women start to crave for a ruling principle that will guide us and bring success and prosperity. It is a necessary stage but a rather external and natural impulse. Inevitably our immaturity leads us to rely on somewhat superficial principles. The people respected Saul because of his appearance! Our youthful inexperience means that we have yet to be able to see and become aware of the deeper, more subtle nature of the issues, desires and forces that affect us. We know this from our own experience as young adults, and we can often detect it when we observe the behaviour and responses of young people. That should enable us to be understanding and sympathetic. But, more, it should help to recognise traits in our own character that are a hangover from this earlier stage.

On those occasions when we are quick to make judgments, can we hear the voice from within telling us to be careful? When we become aware that we're being over-simplistic in the way we evaluate situations, using a "black-or-white" approach, does the higher part of our inner being "kick in", and help to see things differently?

Saul found early success when his forces easily overcame the Ammonite army that had besieged town of Jabesh Gilead. This area east of the Jordan represented charity, or good works, and the Ammonites depict the false ideas that can control and subdue this desire to serve others. An unsophisticated and rather superficial understanding of truth can easily deal with that issue. But when it came to the Philistines, it needed a more profound approach. Saul was told to wait for Samuel to come and make sacrifices, but his arrogant self-confidence led him to become impatient. Instead he made the sacrifices without waiting for Samuel. Can you see how easily we can act without waiting for the Lord, not allowing what remains of our early, rather child-like trust, to do its work in guiding our unformed impulses? Saul's dynasty would not come to be but what he represents serves its purpose in the development of our early character.

Prayer. *Lord Jesus Christ, take from us all arrogance and impatience. In their place, may we be humble and ready to do your will at all times. Whenever our inclinations would lead us to make bad judgments which bring harm to others and to ourselves, fill us with Your Spirit, change us, and make us Your own. For all the blessings we receive from Your merciful hand, we give you thankful hearts. Amen.*

SUNDAY 24th OCTOBER – KING DAVID
Readings: 1 Samuel 16; Matthew 12:46-50

1 Samuel 15 ends with Samuel lamenting for Saul, whom he had anointed as Israel's first king. What's more, the final sentence records that the LORD grieved that He had made Saul king. What we need to remember, as we think about his successor, is that Saul continued to occupy the throne for a good many more years. We might wonder how this could be? Can you really have two kings at once?

Well, this is the inspired Word of God, so we can be sure that, hidden within the external story, there is something important for us to learn. Kings represent the rule of truth, which sounds straightforward. But we know how complex we human beings are. We also know that our spiritual development does not take place in a straight, uninterrupted line. Experience teaches us that we go forwards and backwards, we go up and down, there are valley states as well as mountaintop ones. Remember, too, that even after Saul had been anointed king, it was Samuel who continued to be the "power behind the throne". One ruling principle can serve us for a while, but if we are to progress on our journey, there will be a need for new ruling principles to take us in new directions. But the succession is not immediate; we need time for new ways of thinking and forming judgments to develop and become genuinely part of us.

As we saw last week, Saul's kingship speaks of a relatively external and superficial understanding of true ideas. Eventually, as we demonstrate our desire for something deeper, the Lord provides for us to recognise something deeper, a more spiritual way of understanding what is true. When Samuel told Saul that his failure to obey the Lord meant his kingdom would not endure, he said to him: *The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart.* (1 Sam 13:14) Later He said to Samuel, *Man looks at the outward appearance but the LORD looks at the heart.*

David conveys to us a higher, more spiritual understanding of true principles. His selection at a young age when he was caring for his father's sheep suggests that this ruling principle is grounded in the protection of innocent affections. He showed himself to be a fearless fighter when he overcame Goliath. Later he was a valiant leader who overcame Israel's internal enemies. One of his great achievements was to take Jerusalem from the Canaanites, making the city the centre of national life. In due course, he restored the ark of the covenant to its rightful place at the heart of worship. Saul, we know, came to hate David, and attempted to have him killed – a dramatic example of how the lower or natural degree always wants to destroy what is higher. At first, when David overcame Goliath, and then soothed Saul with his harp playing, the king was favourably disposed. When the higher degree was winning battles, there was a dramatic turn round, for he sensed that his rule was effectively ended – the higher degree or ruling principle had won the day.

At the stage of life when this process is taking place within us, we don't find it easy to recognise what is happening to us. Saul had a long reign, which overlapped with the Lord's anointed. Behind the scenes, the Lord's loving and providential care is working with us to bring about a long-term change. Of course, it is not that the truth itself changes, rather that the way we understand it moves and progresses as the Lord gently moves us onward. Gradually, we come to see that what we have been basing our judgments and attitudes on was inadequate and partial. An example might be to do with how we view success. Climbing the promotion ladder at all costs to be successful eventually loses its compulsive attraction as we come to realise that it does not sit comfortably with an awakening desire to do things because they bring happiness and contentment to people. Likewise, a desire to be the centre of attention may give way to a readiness to listen to others and build them up. The lure of success loses its attraction as a higher principle becomes more firmly established within us. The mistakes we have made become too obvious to ignore, and the higher part of us yearns to lead us to new pastures. The change is very gradual, as the Lord patiently leads us to accept that we really do want to live differently. Apart from anything else, change is not just about yourself. When the basis of the way we view life, and the standards that govern our actions and views, change, our loved ones and colleagues also have to make adjustments. What is more, the hells will not readily give in and allow us to move closer to the Lord, so for a while we shall move between the more natural state and the higher one. All of this is played out in the chapters relating the story of the two kings.

May we find evidence of David's higher power growing ever stronger in us, and the old natural understanding of Saul becoming weaker and losing its influence.

Prayer. *Blessed Lord Jesus, how we yearn to be taken by You into ways and patterns of life that are heavenly. Yet we acknowledge how readily we hold on to what is worldly and natural, and tend to resist the efforts of Your Spirit to lead us gradually upwards. We pray for patience and steadfastness, and for a readiness to hear You knocking at our door. Inspire us to respond positively and energetically, so that the building of Your kingdom in our hearts and minds may strengthen us with heavenly virtues. Praise be to You, O Lord. Amen.*

SUNDAY 31st OCTOBER – KING SOLOMON

Readings: 1 Kings 3; Matthew 6:19-34

King Solomon is arguably one of the best-known figures in the Old Testament. If, perchance, you have yet to read the Scripture passages, sit quietly for a few moments and bring Solomon to mind. If you've already read 1 Kings 3, reflect on what it has told you about Solomon. I wonder what parts or episodes in his life-story really stand out for you? Very likely they will be stories you learned as a child and young person, for these make a great impression on us and stick in our mind. How do you see Solomon? What particular qualities stand out? Was his life a complete "success"? What do you remember about the latter part of his life?

One thing you might like to think about is the pattern to the start of each reign. Samuel continued to be the "power behind the throne" after Saul had been chosen as the first king of Israel. David spent many years as the Lord's anointed before he formally succeeded Saul. David chose Solomon, the youngest of his sons, to be his successor well before his impending death. It reminds us that, throughout our life, we go through periods when we are moving on along the path of regeneration but we still, as it were, have a foot in the earlier phase. It is helpful for us to recognise what is happening when we have these experiences of apparently regressing to old actions and feelings. We are being given the opportunity to admit what is happening, and to seek the Lord's help in consolidating our progress until it is fully established.

The reading from 1 Kings 3 is full of arresting moments, beginning with the first verse, when we are told that Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter. Then at verse 3 comes the statement that *Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places*. In a dream God said to him, *Ask for whatever you want me to give you*, words echoed by Jesus when talking to His disciples, as in Matthew 6. Solomon's response is awe inspiring, showing his humility – *But I am only a child*. All he wanted was *-a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong*. It is clear from the narrative that the LORD did indeed grant Solomon his wish. His wisdom became known throughout the civilised world. The LORD also granted what Solomon had not asked for – wealth and power. The territory established by his father David became a great nation stretching from the Euphrates in the north to the Mediterranean coast and down to Egypt. Unlike his father's reign, Solomon's was marked by peace. After all, his very name means "peaceful". Peace, the sort of peace that passes all human understanding, is surely a state of life we all seek, especially when we have been through a stressful or demanding period. It is, after all, the essence of heaven. Yet, even in heaven, angels find themselves experiencing the light and shade of human life, for even there we are still subject to our inclination to turn inward and away from the Lord. Hence, we live through phases of darkness, though they are short-lived for such is the dominant and ruling force of our spirit that we quickly realise that we have turned away from the source of light and heat; we turn back to Him, order is restored, and we are at peace.

King David had wished and intended to build a temple in Jerusalem to provide a permanent centre of worship of the one God of heaven and earth. We might feel sorrow for him that his wish was not fulfilled during his reign. Only when Solomon had become king could that momentous task be undertaken, and the ark of the covenant returned to its rightful place. Well, think for a moment. David's 40 years as king involved him in endless battles with the enemies of Israel. Battles against enemies always speak about the inner battles we undergo so that the hellish influences can be overcome and rejected. This was the pattern of Jesus Christ's life during His time on earth, and it is the pattern of ours. Solomon's reign, his wisdom and achievements portray the sequence of our own development. As we walk according to the Lord's guidance, and as we stick doggedly and faithfully to that path, slowly, little by little, the kingdom of love and wisdom working together brings about much spiritual wealth and power, and we can do great things in His name.

BUT, as the final chapter (1K11) in Solomon's life begins, in this life we're never beyond temptation, and the possibility of falling into errors and sinful behaviour remains with us. Solomon's human frailty meant that he succumbed to his temptations, and came to feel he was above Divine law, one of the dangerous side-effects of success, power and prosperity. For us, as for Solomon, the highest goal – to develop a heavenly character – must be the ultimate aim. Love to the Lord and to our neighbour are what Jesus Christ taught and demonstrated. This is the wisdom of Solomon, the ruling principle leading us to heaven.

Prayer. *O mighty and everlasting King, our Lord Jesus Christ, lead us by your love and wisdom to value and desire everything that is good and true. May the values we espouse make us not only loyal subjects of your heavenly kingdom but disciples who can bring others to know and experience you as their King. We thank you for Your Holy Word, bringing us to know You and Your Divine care for us. May we turn to it to find the inspiration to be faithful when we are tempted, and the humility to know that You alone have all power and glory. Amen.*

Home Worship November 2021 – Jan Millar

November 7th **Love** Read John 15: 1-17

Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” On the surface it appears so simple, and yet, it is actually deeply profound. We need to ask ourselves whether we really know what love is? There is a vast difference between selfish love and heavenly love. The teachings of our Church tell us that what really matters is our motive for expressing that love.

If we experience selfish love, we are merely showing love to others for our own advantage. Our only concern is what we can get out of it. We love ourselves, and the material things of the world, far more than we love God and our neighbour. But true heavenly love is very different. It is expressing God’s love for us by doing good and useful things simply for their own sake. Our actions come from a love of goodness, honesty and fairness, by wanting to serve God through living a life of service to others. As the poet John Donne said, “No man is an island.” We learn who we are through our involvement with our fellow human beings.

No one of us develops mentally and emotionally to our full potential if we seek isolation rather than close relationships with other people. We come to terms with our own defects and have opportunities to build on our strong points while experiencing the shortcomings and strengths of others. Real consideration for others demands that we treat them with the same respect we’d like to receive. Because we truly receive love when we give love with no strings attached.

None of us is free from the need to be loved and most of us seek reassurance of that love from the people in our lives that really matter to us – our family and our friends. However, we’ll never find what we’re looking for until we learn to love ourselves. Only when we learn to love ourselves can we realistically learn to love others. No one can hurt us emotionally unless we allow the hurt. We’re full partners in everything we do, and taking responsibility for our actions and our desires, is our first step towards being fully loveable. If we have no self-respect, dwell on the mistakes of the past and the hurts inflicted by other people, we can never know true happiness. If we feel less than adequate because of our own imperfections, it is easy to treat others as failures too. How someone treats us very often indicates how that person feels about himself. Reflect on how easy you find it to put other people’s feelings before your own. Is this something you need to work on for your personal spiritual development?

The giving and receiving of loving thoughts helps us through all our difficulties. Loving, and feeling loved, reminds us that we are never alone in our struggles. In partnership, through true friendship, we can cope with whatever life throws at us. This is what the Lord’s new commandment to love one another is all about. It is to love our neighbour regardless of their love for us, and to seek only their ultimate good. It is a true act of service for the benefit of others – our way of loving one another, so that we are indeed at one with God, other people and ourselves.

Swedenborg tells us that we can become one with God only through love and loving actions, love being the essence of spiritual connection. [Arcana Coelestia 2349] As Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, *“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”*

[1 Corinthians 13: 13]

Prayer: Thank you Lord for the unconditional love which you give to all your children and for loving us even when we find it difficult to love ourselves. Teach us to accept what we are and through sharing your love with others help us to grow into what you know we can become. Live in our hearts so that we may know and love you as you know and love us. Amen

November 14 **Peace** Read Luke 1: 67-79 Zechariah's song

Our theme for Remembrance Sunday is PEACE. But just what do we mean by 'peace'? In the western world we often think of peace as being the absence of trouble. But the Hebrew word 'Shalom' or 'Peace be with you' has a very different meaning. It doesn't mean 'I hope you don't get into any trouble' but instead it translates as 'I hope you have all the highest good coming your way'. As Swedenborg says it is the blessedness of heart and soul from the marriage of good and truth - all things which come from the Lord and the inner joys of life in them. [Conjugal Love 180]

At the very end of his earthy life when the Lord was in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he was crucified, despite knowing what he was facing, Jesus still took time to comfort his disciples with a wonderful message of peace. He said *'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid'*. [John 14:27] The peace that Jesus is speaking about enables believers to remain calm in whatever fearful circumstances they find themselves. It is something deep within the heart and soul that cannot be overruled by outward circumstances but that instead fills them with a sense of calmness and acceptance.

Jesus himself is the embodiment of that peace because it is his own personal peace. It is the same deep, rich peace that stilled his heart in spite all those who threatened, mocked and tortured him at the Crucifixion. In the midst of all the terrible persecution which he endured Jesus was calm and unfaltering. He was a rock. Can you imagine how this must have confounded his enemies? Despite everything that was said and done to him he remained calm, controlled and at peace.

That is the peace which he gives to each and every one of us so that we too may experience serenity in times of conflict and danger, calm in times of trouble, and the same freedom from anxiety which the Lord himself experienced. Reflect on the times in your life when you have been beset by troubles and turned to the Lord for comfort, reassurance and peace.

But it isn't enough to merely feel this wonderful sense of peace within ourselves. We are also told to share that peace with our fellow men and women. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God"*. [Matthew 5: 9]. So we are all called upon to become peacemakers – people who strive to do something to improve the situation in which they find themselves and others. Are there any circumstances in your life today when you can act as a peacemaker? Are you able to do what you can to diffuse a bad situation, offering a word of comfort and encouragement to someone going through a difficult time in their lives? These may seem small things in comparison with all the wars and conflict in the world around us but it is only through the individual acts of men and women everywhere that change can ultimately be wrought and peace on earth can become a reality.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we know that in whatever we face in life, you are our peace and refuge, a very present help in times of trouble. Thank you that you remind us throughout your Word, we do not face the storms and vicissitudes of life alone, but you are always with us, speaking peace to our hearts and minds and bringing rest to our souls. Let there be peace on earth Lord, and let it begin with me. Amen

November 21 **Faith** Read Matthew 16: 13-28, James 2: 14-28

In our reading today we see the first recognition of who Jesus is. Peter saw and acknowledged the greatest truth of all time. When Jesus asked the disciples who people say the Son of Man is, Peter replied *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"*. This simple fisherman recognised that here was no ordinary man but God himself on earth. Peter symbolises the rock of faith on which the Christian church is built – the natural rock upon which the spiritual can be built. Our natural mind stores up the ideas but it is the spiritual light within each of us that brings those ideas to meaningful life. Here is the rock on which we can build a sure foundation.

Caesarea Phillippi, where this event takes place, had been a centre for the worship of Baal and the Greek god Pan and was where Herod the Great had built a temple to honour Caesar Augustus. It was in this area associated with pagan superstition that Peter made his confession of Jesus as the Christ and near Caesar's temple that Jesus stated he would build his church. This was no earthly building but a spiritual foundation on which our faith can be built. It is the Church within each and every one of us.

We need to remember that the Church is not an organisation but is in the hearts and minds of men and women. Organisations exist to help us find the true Church but it is only through how we live a life of faith and service to others that the Church can be built within us. The Writings tell us that a true faith is founded on charity. *"By faith I understand spiritual faith in which the spirit and life is derived solely from charity, for charity is spiritual and by means of it faith is. Therefore faith without charity is a merely natural faith, and this faith is a dead faith."* [Apocalypse Revealed 875] Faith without works is dead. The letter of James tells us *"You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone"* [James 2: 24] and *"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead"*. [James 2: 26]

Once we like Peter make our own confession of faith, it is not the end of our journey, it is rather the beginning of the journey of being transformed. We are called upon to play our part in building the Lord's Kingdom here on earth. How does this speak to you in your life today? Is your faith built on a firm foundation which is reflected in how you live your life? How do you reach out to others to share with them the Lord's love and truth?

We need to remember that the Church isn't just the New Church, Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics or any other denomination. It consists of all who seek to follow the Lord and who, like Peter, see past the man Jesus and recognise his Divinity. The true Church is in the heart and life of individual men and women of faith. It is the strength of our faith that will determine the strength of the Church within us.

Prayer: Dear Lord, remind us that worship without action and faith without deeds promises much but yields nothing. Teach us to put our faith into practice in our daily lives so that we may play our part in building your Kingdom. Help us to make you real to others; showing the reality of our faith by the lives we lead and the service we offer, to the glory of your name. Amen

November 28 **Hope & Trust** Read Psalm 33

Christians claim to place their hope and trust in the Lord but is that always easy to do? If the Lord appears to fulfil our hopes we probably don't have any trouble having trust in him but what about the times when our hopes are dashed, when life seems to be an uphill struggle and we feel isolated, not only from other people, but perhaps even from the Lord himself. It is at times like this that our faith is really tested. Despite all the terrible things that are happening globally do we still trust the Lord and believe he will help us to face our current situation?

In the ever changing and uncertain times we are living in today we can all feel insecure and vulnerable and need something stable, secure and trustworthy in our lives. It is then we can turn to the one who is always there for us, the Lord himself. As Charles Wesley says in the second verse of his great hymn *Jesus, lover of my soul, 'Other refuge have I none, all my hope in you I see; leave, ah leave me not alone, still support and comfort me. All my trust on you is laid, all my help from you I bring: cover my defenceless head with the shadow of your wing.'*

What a beautiful picture of being held in the shadow of the Lord's wing. Whatever we have to face he is there to comfort, strengthen and protect us if we trust in him and his power to provide what we truly need in order to find our true path in life and follow the direction that he wants us to take. If we can learn to listen when he speaks to us, to trust and obey him we can become the kind of people that the Lord teaches us to be.

It's not that life no longer has difficulties, but we have the realisation that those difficulties are ultimately nothing to fear and that we can remain confident in God in the midst of them. He is a vibrant living force within our lives even when we feel lost and alone or that the world is against us. We trust that he will give us what we need in any situation while remembering that what we need and what we want can be two very different things. The Lord knows each and every one of us intimately. He knows our strengths and our weaknesses. He is able to give us the love and support we need at all times in our lives even though we may not always be aware of it.

People of true faith find out by experience where their strength lies. Reflect on what God has done for you in the past. Does this help you to accept the present, and not be afraid of what may lie in the future? Are you able to put your hope and trust in the Lord and hand over your fears and anxieties into his hands and feel his love and protection surrounding you?

As we enter the Advent season, a time of hope and expectation, its message remains eternally true - when our need is urgent, his light will overcome our darkness if we put hope and trust in him. So go forward with confidence, secure in the knowledge that our Lord and Saviour will never fail us but is always present with us opening up a life of infinite possibilities to experience the hope and joy that he alone can bring.

Prayer: Dear Lord, at the darkest times in our lives when things may appear to be hopeless, teach us to put our trust in you, knowing that it is at these times you are most powerfully at work. Help us to feel you at our side giving us the strength, the courage, the peace and the hope to face whatever tomorrow may bring. In you Lord we put our faith, our hope and our trust not just for today but for eternity. Amen

Mary, the Mother of Jesus part one Bible Reading: Luke 1 v26-38 December 5th

We are all familiar with the Christmas story and probably have certain aspects of it that are special or hold particular meaning for us. For me hearing about Mary always has me reflecting on how big a task she chose to bear, but with so much humility and grace. Even reflecting on her as I write this has my spine tingling with its enormity.

Firstly we hear that Mary was pledged or betrothed to be married to Joseph. At this time betrothal lasted about a year and was considered to be as binding as marriage. This could only be broken by a divorce which was rather frowned on.

So, put yourself in Mary's shoes, an angel appears to you to tell you the news that you are expecting a baby!..... WOW!....

How would you feel if this was you? Reflect on this for a moment.....

Mary is troubled at first but notice that by the time the angel mentions she is to give birth to a son, it would appear Mary is less fearful, and more questioning. 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' she asks. Of course we have no idea how long the angel waited with her in the Biblical account, but put yourself in her place..... How would you react?..... What about the implications – with her impending marriage....how would her parents react?.....What about Joseph?..... This must have been on her mind as the angel imparted this message.

But incredibly after the angel has told her that 'nothing is impossible with God', Mary says, what for me is a very profound statement, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." Absolutely wonderful words which show how humble Mary was.

We can only wonder how Mary must have felt when the angel left but clearly she is excited enough to go and tell her cousin, Elizabeth, the news. And, Elizabeth, who is pregnant herself is amazed that Mary, the 'mother of my Lord' should visit her. This charming story of two pregnant women clearly delighting in their situation is absolutely enchanting. **What exciting news have you had that you could hardly wait to tell someone about?**

I am sure we all have had special and exciting things happen and to which we can hardly wait to share the news. **Now read: Luke 1 v39-45.**

Mary seems here to be enjoying her new found situation. I wonder how this sort of message affects us. We receive ideas into our mind all the time and can clearly choose how we deal with them. Do we greet them with joy or with trepidation? Do we welcome them, or do we wish them gone? Do we allow them to grow or not? Perhaps we even suppress them....

Mary clearly accepted this special baby she was to bring into the world. She delighted in it and even shared it with her cousin. So reflect on how you receive this gift of Jesus birth into your life, how you receive new concepts you learn from Him and how you allow them to grow as you now read Mary's song, known as the Magnificat in **Luke 1 v46–55.**

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we thank you for this advent season when we come to remember your birth and to rejoice in Your Light come into the world. We thank, this morning, especially for Mary who so willingly accepted a special mission. Who opened herself to you so that you could come to us here on earth and share yourself with the world. We thank you that she so openly gave of herself. What wonder, what amazement and what joy must it have been but also perhaps there was anxiety and a certain amount of fearfulness and yet she was so accepting. Help us to be like Mary – willing to open ourselves to receiving you into our lives; to be ready to receive new ideas and to want them to grow and develop within us. Lord, you love us unconditionally, like Mary and all mothers love their children. Help us to be ready to return that love to you but also to be open to loving others to and to reaching out to them with Your Love. Amen.

How far is it to Bethlehem

Bible Reading: Luke 2v 1-5 & 11-16

December 12th

How far is it to Bethlehem, not very far. So the song/poem goes (*see attachment*). Well, in fact it is 70 miles from Nazareth by the most direct route. However Mary and Joseph would have had to travel more like 100 miles to avoid going through Samaria. As you may know, already, the Jews and the Samaritans did not get on so the Jews would avoid travelling through their territory.

How hard that must have been, under normal circumstances, but for Mary the addition of coping with pregnancy on this, must have been very trying. The only other means of travel, other than your feet, in those days, were camels and donkeys. It is unlikely that Mary and Joseph could have afforded a camel, certainly, but Mary may have had use of a donkey, although there is nothing in the nativity story, in the Bible, that actually says how they travelled; just where and why.

The hymn O little Town of Bethlehem (*see attachment*) starts with, 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'. Bethlehem was, indeed, a small town about 6 miles from Jerusalem. It is a hill town and although quite important in Biblical times has now the association with it being Jesus birthplace as it's only status. It is now inhabited by Muslims and Christians alike. Bethlehem was the home of David, who became King of Israel, and so became the City of David and thus when a census was called, Mary and Joseph, who descended from the line of David, were compelled to travel to Bethlehem to be taxed. And thus they underwent a perilous journey from Nazareth as a result. Perilous because a lot of the route would be through remote areas which were dark and hardly travelled making them dangerous because of the risk of attack from wild beasts and robbers.

Have you ever had to make a difficult journey either on foot or other means?

How did it affect you? Reflect on how Mary and Joseph would have been feeling with their situation.

Having made it to Bethlehem they arrive just when Mary is due to be delivered. One can imagine arriving in this hilltop town at night, and being settled in a stable, because all the Inns were full. Everything had calmed down and all was silent. And yet a bright star shines as the sign of the Saviour's birth – the sign of a light that will be everlasting and will bring hope to all the people. The light which shone all around for the Shepherds and which, later, the wise men followed, as a star, to guide them.

As we look at the second verse of this carol it affirms the birth of the Saviour and I see Mary caring for her young infant as the world sleeps. And yet, surely, she is not alone. She is being watched by the angels as we, too are loved and cared for by the Lord, through his angels. We hear again of the star proclaiming the holy birth and this sense of singing at the news of his birth. Of course we know the shepherds were told the news by the angels. **Read Luke 2 v10-14** So this birth is clearly destined to bring peace to men on earth. We often talk about peace at this time and it is such a lovely thing to hope for.

Moving on we are reminded, in the third verse, that Jesus didn't come into the world to loud trumpet calls or to shout 'hey, look at me!' He came silently and to bring his blessings to those who would listen to Him. He didn't just come to those who recognised Him, He came to all those who needed Him as well as those who already loved Him. He was born into a world that was dark, which had lost its way and He came to light the way. But also, He didn't push His way in, where meek souls will receive Him so He came to them.

And finally in verse four we come back to Bethlehem. Bethlehem means, 'House of Bread'. 'Beth' means 'House of' and so any place that has this means this. For example, Bethany means 'House of dates' and Bethel means 'House of God'. So Bethlehem as I said, means 'House of Bread' and indeed the Lord says, 'I am the Bread of Life'. The Lord comes to each one of us to show us how we can lead good and useful lives. Bread symbolises goodness and of course it is a useful commodity and thus we can learn how, by living good lives, we can be useful in Church, our community and to others. And so in this last verse, which is like a prayer, we can ask the Lord to be with us at this special time, to help us to move away from being selfish and to be born anew. And we can ask the Lord to be with us and abide with us always.

Such a lovely Carol which, for me at least, holds a special place at Christmas and which helps us to reflect so much on the true meaning of this time of year and helps us to reflect on what the birth means to each one of us. And it took place in Bethlehem, a small town up on a hill, not a particularly important place but, certainly, the right place for many reasons; right because it was the City of David and Joseph and Mary were of the same lineage; the right place because of its name, 'House of Bread' and the link with the Lord calling himself the 'Bread of Life', reminding us that the route to useful lives is in the Lord and his goodness.

Prayer

Dear Lord, as we journey forward to the special day may we reflect on the journey that Mary and Joseph took to reach Bethlehem. The struggles, the dangers and the anxiety they must have, surely, faced as they travelled through harsh and, often very isolated terrain. As we, too face, journeys to see family this Christmas, we, too, pray that you will guide and be with us as I am sure you were with Mary and Joseph long ago. As we reflect on the little town of Bethlehem which became so special at this time, where the angels watched and waited, where the shepherds came rejoicing to a little stable and where the wise men were, also led in the light to meet the Saviour and to offer their gifts; may we consider how Your birth can bring light, can lighten the dark areas of our lives and can help us to feel special in Your eyes. Thank you for this opportunity to call to mind the meaning of Christmas and to call to mind how much Bethlehem served as a useful place for a wonderful baby to lay his sweet head. Amen.

The Shepherd

Bible Reading: John 10 v1-20 & Luke 2 v8-20

December 19th

In our society today sheep are considered quite silly creatures and whilst they represent innocence, which is grounded in humility, the modern business world expects us to be self-assured and assertive, which doesn't exactly say much for us as sheep! Sheep are easily led and follow the crowd. In reality they tend to wander off. They aren't always aware of danger, blind to the disasters that lie ahead, and even when they are rescued they will go and do it all over again. **Does this sound familiar?!** Jesus, in John's gospel, likens us to sheep. We can be easily led, we don't always learn from our mistakes and plunge ourselves into danger, blissfully unaware of the consequences.

In olden times the shepherd was the official who cared for the sheep. In our modern world this role has changed somewhat but there are still some countries where sheep are looked after in much the same way. The shepherd's role was to protect and guide the sheep. They would carry a staff which could be used to retrieve a stray sheep or to ward off wild beasts. They would live with the sheep and guard them from danger. Their task was quite a responsibility. They would have had to pay for any sheep they lost and provide proof of any sheep killed by wild animals.

Would you have wanted to do this? Reflect on the challenges these Shepherds faced...

One can only imagine how little money was involved in this task. It was more a labour of love than wealth. It was interesting to note that the sheep recognised their master's voice and, likewise, the shepherd recognised each sheep by name.

It was to these simple shepherds that the angels appeared; that the message of the birth of Jesus was given. Shepherds represent simple faith and goodness. This is reflected in their reaction to the news of the Saviour's birth. They simply believed and went to Bethlehem, to find the baby.

Have you ever wondered why, if there were signs announcing the birth of Jesus - the angels appearing to the shepherds and the star appearing to the wise men, that more people weren't aware of the news of Jesus arrival, especially as this event was long awaited by the Hebrews? Whilst some historical notes suggest that these signs were visible the reality is different. In the Biblical account of the shepherds story we hear that the people were 'amazed at what the shepherds told them'. They most likely considered it a story rather than fact. The fact is that we do not always believe what we hear. We only believe what we want to believe. For the simple shepherds - they needed to be told directly, in what was nevertheless

an exciting way; whilst the wise men, by contrast, who were aware of symbolism, were shown a star, which then guided them. Swedenborg tells us that we are in freedom to choose whether to believe what we read in the Word or not. We accept or reject what we hear. Thus the angels know that our freedom must not be disturbed.

So the shepherds, in their unsophisticated way, accepted all that they heard and with simple trust went to find the baby Jesus. They recognised that what they heard was true. They trusted its message as being correct. Like true shepherds who recognise their sheep, they recognise the voice of the master - that is the Lord. True recognition comes when we read the Word and recognise the material as the Word of God. In John's Gospel we heard: I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. We are God's sheep if we recognise him through reading the Word, through our words and actions - the way we live our lives. We are truly his sheep if we, like the shepherds who heard the angels message and in simple trust and recognition of the Lord's voice, went to Bethlehem, trust in the Lord and listen out for his voice, follow his ways and accept his guidance and love.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, it wasn't those important in the eyes of the world who first heard the Good News; it wasn't the religious elite or those specially gifted. It was the shepherds - ordinary, everyday people like each of us. Teach us, through their story, that whoever we are, however insignificant we may feel, you value each one of us and want us to know you for ourselves. Amen.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus *part two* Bible Reading: Luke 2 v1-7 December 26th

So because of the census Mary and Joseph now travel to Bethlehem in Judea. A journey of some 80 miles south of Nazareth, their home, which would have taken about 3 days in length. In Matthew's gospel there has been another angel visitation, this time to Joseph. We do not know when in the story this took place. We do not know Joseph's reaction, other than, that, before the angel's visit, he has in mind to divorce Mary to save her public disgrace. In those days a married woman, pregnant by another man, was scorned and would have, likely, been stoned.

Read: Matthew 1 v18-25

We can only imagine the turmoil that this time may have caused in Mary and Joseph's relationship. Now they have a long journey ahead of them.

For Mary this must have had mixed emotions. Excitement at the impending birth, anxiety at the possibility of being away from home for this and exhaustion from the tediousness of a long journey.

And then, in a lowly stable, this miraculous birth takes place. Wonder..... Amazement..... peace.... These are all emotions we associate with this time of year and I am sure these are some of the feelings that Mary, and indeed, Joseph, would have been feeling when they saw this newly born infant. And we can feel these, too, when new ideas, loving thoughts from the Lord, enter our hearts and start to take hold, to really grow and develop. But it doesn't stop there, does it?.... Just as new ideas need nurturing so Mary's role was still needed to nurture the infant Jesus.

Reflect on what the Christmas story means to you. What feelings does it bring for you at this time of year?

We then, of course, hear the excitement of the shepherds as they rush to greet this new born child. But Mary simply treasures these things and ponders them in her heart. I love this phrase. This always brings up many emotions, considering how Mary must have delighted in her new role. She must really be savouring this new baby she was responsible for. Of course these days, with modern technology, we have photos and birth records to remind us of special events but this doesn't seem to have the same ring to it, does it? Mary treasures these, she ponders them....

How do you consider new ideas the Lord gives you?.... How do you allow them to grow and develop? Do you treasure them and ponder them?....

So Mary showed that throughout all that happened to her, her strength came from the Lord and this gave her so much to be thankful for. I hope you, too, have so much to thank the Lord for this Christmas and always. And this Christmas may we reflect on the true meaning that this coming means and enjoy a time of peace, hope, love and joy which shall be for all people.

Prayer

Dearest Lord, we come here today to celebrate the birth of your son, Jesus, born a baby in a manger to the virgin, Mary, and we thank you for this opportunity to recall the events of the true Christmas and to bring to mind the willingness of Mary to be the mother of Jesus. We thank you for her faith in her Lord, for the humility she showed and the love and care she gave. Help us to be willing channels of Your Love and to also share that love with others so that they too may experience Your unconditional Love for all. Amen.

Attachments:

Poem:

How far is it to Bethlehem?

Words: Frances Chesterton

Source: Anne Thaxter Eaton, ed., *Welcome Christmas! A Garland Of Poems*. New York: The Viking Press, 1955.

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| <p>1 How far is it to Bethlehem?
Not very far.
Shall we find the stable-room
Lit by a star?</p> <p>2 Can we see the little Child?
Is He within?
If we lift the wooden latch,
May we go in?</p> <p>3 May we stroke the creatures there —
Ox, ass, or sheep?
May we peep like them and see
Jesus asleep?</p> <p>4 If we touch His tiny hand,
Will He awake?
Will He know we've come so far
Just for His sake?</p> | <p>5 Great kings have precious gifts,
And we have naught;
Little smiles and little tears
Are all we brought.</p> <p>6 For all weary children
Mary must weep;
Here, on His bed of straw,
Sleep, children, sleep.</p> <p>7 God, in His mother's arms,
Babes in the byre,
Sleep, as they sleep who find
Their heart's desire</p> |
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Hymn 302 - O little town of Bethlehem

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| <p>1. O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie;
above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
him, still
are met in thee tonight;</p> <p>2. For Christ is born of Mary;
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
and peace to men on earth.</p> | <p>3. How silently, how silently
the wondrous gift is given;
so God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive

the dear Christ enters in.</p> <p>4. O holy child of Bethlehem,
descend to us we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us to-day.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel.</p> |
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Phillips Brooks, 1835–1893