



WELCOME TO ST PETER'S ASH



THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT ST PETER'S IS CALLED TO CELEBRATE, LIVE AND REFLECT THE LOVE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST

4TH OCTOBER 2020

TRINITY 17

READINGS FOR TODAY

Isaiah 5 v 1 - 7
Philippians 3 v 4b - 14
Matthew 21 v 33 - end

PARISH OFFICE: Monday & Friday 9 – 30 am to 11 – 30 am
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BOOKINGS OF WEDDINGS & BAPTISMS – phone for an appointment on 01252 321517 or 331161
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When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

COLLECT FOR TRINITY 17

Almighty God,
you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you:
pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself,
and so bring us at last to your heavenly city
where we shall see you face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

THIS WEEK

WEDNESDAY HOLY COMMUNION 9 – 30 am

CARE AND SHARE

Food is being left outside church for people to take for themselves, or to share with others who they know are in need. The shelves are usually being emptied each day. If you would like to donate any tins, packets, UHT milk, tea, coffee etc. please bring it to church with you or leave it on the doorstep of the Rectory. Thank you.

ANNUAL CHURCH MEETING

This meeting, postponed from April, will now be on Sunday 18th October in church. We will be having a shorter service of Family Communion at 10 am and the meeting will follow immediately after. We hope to be finished by 11 – 15 am. Nomination forms are in the middle of church for 4 PCC members and for one churchwarden, as Charles will be standing down.

SHOEBOX APPEAL

Shoebox time is here again! There are some ready to fold boxes and leaflets at the back of the church. NO toothpaste, sweets or 4 suit cards please, BUT homemade stuffed toys are allowed if stuffed with proper toy stuffing. Boxes can be made on line for £20, which includes the 'postage' and you can choose items from a limited list. There will be a box for donations in church but no big packing party this year, unless the rules change. Thank You. Barbara Rose

CHILDREN'S SOCIETY BOXES

Because banking is more difficult this year, if it is at all possible, please count the money in your box yourself, then give me a cheque – made out to M Lamont. I will give you a receipt in the form of a new label to seal your box for next year. Thank you for your help.

I am selling Christmas cards again this year please see Mary Lamont for details.

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK – TRINITY 18

Isaiah 25 v 1 - 9; Philippians 4 v 1 - 9;
Matthew 22 v 1 – 14

Congratulations and good wishes to everyone celebrating their birthday this week, especially:

HEATHER HILLMAN (7TH)

HARVEST

Thank you for all of the Harvest gifts to our Care and Share initiative. Also, for all of the donations to Step by Step.

PLEASE PRAY FOR THE SOULS OF THE RECENTLY DEPARTED, ESPECIALLY:

WYN LONG; RICHARD STOKES; EDNA PEARSON;
JUNE MIDDLETON

DON'T FORGET OUR ST PETER'S PRAYER CHAIN

If you would like emergency prayer for yourself or somebody else please phone: 01252 322292 or 01252 323037 – this is a confidential service.

Morning Prayer at 10 am on Sunday

If there is more than one person present, someone may wish to read the parts marked (L), everyone says the rest together. You can say alternate verses in the Psalm and in the Canticles. Please have a Bible to hand. You may wish to light a candle.

(L) O Lord, open our lips

All: and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

- 1 Bless the Lord all you works of the Lord: ♦
sing his praise and exalt him for ever.
- 2 Bless the Lord you heavens: ♦
sing his praise and exalt him for ever.
- 3 Bless the Lord you angels of the Lord: ♦
sing his praise and exalt him for ever.
- 4 Bless the Lord all people on earth: ♦
sing his praise and exalt him for ever.
- 5 O people of God bless the Lord: ♦
sing his praise and exalt him for ever.
- 6 Bless the Lord you priests of the Lord: ♦
sing his praise and exalt him for ever.
- 7 Bless the Lord you servants of the Lord: ♦
sing his praise and exalt him for ever.
- 8 Bless the Lord all you of upright spirit: ♦
bless the Lord you that are holy and humble in heart.

All Bless the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: ♦
sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

This hymn is said or sung:

O happy band of pilgrims,
If onward ye will tread
With Jesus as your fellow
To Jesus as your Head!

O happy if ye labour
As Jesus did for men;
O happy if ye hunger
As Jesus hungered then!

The cross that Jesus carried
He carried as your due;
The crown that Jesus weareth,
He weareth it for you.

The faith by which ye see him,
The hope in which ye yearn,
The love that through all troubles
To him alone will turn.

What are they but forerunners
To lead you to his sight?
The longed-for distant dawning
Of uncreated light?

The trials that beset you,
The sorrows ye endure,
The manifold temptations
That death alone can cure.

What are they but his jewels
Of right celestial worth?
What are they but the ladder
Set up to heaven on earth?

O happy band of pilgrims,
Look upward to the skies,
Where such a light affliction
Shall win you such a prize!

(L) The night has passed, and the day lies open before us; let us pray with one heart and mind:

All: As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,
so may the light of your presence, O God,
set our hearts on fire with love for you;
now and for ever. Amen.

(L) Come, Holy Spirit of God,
All and search our hearts with the light of Christ.

(L) Our Lord Jesus Christ said:

The first commandment is this:
'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, with all your mind,
and with all your strength.'

The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'
There is no other commandment greater than these.
On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

All Amen. Lord, have mercy.

After a period of reflection

(L) Come, let us return to the Lord and say:

All Lord our God,
in our sin we have avoided your call.
Our love for you is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes away early.
Have mercy on us;
deliver us from judgement;
bind up our wounds and revive us;
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(L) May almighty God,
who sent his Son into the world to save sinners,
bring us his pardon and peace, now and for ever.
All Amen.

All say The Gloria:

Glory to God in the highest,
and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:
receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

We now say the collect for Trinity 17 (see first page)

*Read Isaiah 5 v 1 – 7 followed by Psalm 80 v 9 - 17
concluding with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as
it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Read *Philippians 3 v 4b - 14*

(L) Alleluia, alleluia.

I am the light of the world, says the Lord.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

All: Alleluia.

Now read *Matthew 21 v 33 – end* Here are some thoughts on today's readings from Fr Keith:

I remember the first time I saw a vineyard. It was many years ago, and we were driving through Burgundy. Suddenly, I noticed on the hillsides row after row of carefully tended vines, and we began passing through places whose names I had only ever seen before on wine bottle labels – Beaujolais, Beaune, Chablis, Maconais. For some reason I found it terribly exciting and exotic, perhaps because, in those days, it was such a novelty for someone from the UK. Now, of course, thanks, in part, to climate change, you only have to go up to the Hogs Back to get that experience!

In warmer climes, vineyards have been around a very long time. Grapes were one of the earliest crops to be cultivated and, certainly, to Jesus' listeners they would have been just a familiar part of everyday life. Wine, not a special treat, but just a normal accompaniment to food – water, being a much more dangerous drink health wise in those days.

It is therefore not surprising that Jesus uses the image of a Vineyard in some of his stories and even describes Himself as The True Vine, choosing wine to represent His Blood in the Eucharist. In doing this he was building on a tradition that goes right back into the Old Testament, as is shown by our first reading from Isaiah today.

The original Isaiah lived nearly 800 years before Jesus, and He was called by God as a prophet at a time when the two Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were under growing threat from the super-power to the north of them, the Kingdom of Assyria. Isaiah spoke out against the ungrateful people who God had settled in their promised land, but were now falling far short of the laws and instructions that He had given them. They were going through the motions of religion but at the same time becoming more corrupt and unjust, not caring for the weak and the poor, but only concerned with enriching themselves. The story of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 is the culmination of a series of threats that God is making against this wayward people, unless they change their wicked ways. They have been under the misapprehension that because God had chosen them, they could get away with anything and God would still look after them. Isaiah is there to put them straight on that!

God carefully prepared his 'vineyard' for them but it has yielded wild grapes instead of good ones. God's response? He is about to abandon it to the forces who will destroy it, in this case the Assyrians who are ready to invade and trample it down. It's a harsh message, but God always expects justice and righteousness and won't put up with His people's bad behaviour anymore.

Now, Jesus' hearers would have been well aware of their history. In Isaiah's time the Kingdom of Israel was indeed destroyed, and the Kingdom of Judah, around Jerusalem, went the same way about 100 years later. They would also have known the actual vineyard story from Isaiah, and Jesus's images in today's parable would have been all too clear to them. Once again, God was fed up with the sinfulness of the present generation. They were following

in the footsteps of their forefathers who had rejected all of the prophets that God had sent to them. Now, here Jesus was, God's Son, and they were about to kill him. He was the cornerstone that they were rejecting, and, as in Isaiah's time the consequences were going to be dire. Jesus doesn't mince his words – 'The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces and crushed.'

The chief priests and Pharisees very quickly got the message, but at this stage they held back from silencing Jesus. Just a generation later though, in AD 70, the Romans did destroy the Temple in Jerusalem, and of course, in spite of the crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead and the Church he established grew and grew. History, if not exactly repeating itself from 800 years before, showed that God still expects his messengers to be listened to and acted on, and especially those of his Son.

What, though, do these stories have to say to us today? We might read them and think they are just referring to people in history. After all, today, aren't we church people the 'good guys'? Don't we produce 'good fruit' in God's vineyard, and give back to God what he expects of us? Just by being here to worship, doesn't that show that we listen to God's Word and are trying to do His will. Surely, we are not the 'wild grapes' or the 'wicked tenants' being referred to in our readings this morning?

As always, we should be wary of awarding ourselves 'a clean bill of health' too quickly. I'm sure that the people of Isaiah's time, and many of the people of Jesus' time, had convinced themselves that, any grievance that God might have, had nothing to do with them personally. If things were going wrong, other people must surely be to blame – it's both Adam and Eve's excuse in the Garden of Eden story – it wasn't me, it was him or her!

Over the past few weeks our readings have repeatedly warned against such complacency, denial of our sinfulness, and inability to sort things out on our own. We are all sinners, and we need God's grace to be forgiven and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. So, we shouldn't even try to pull the wool over God's eyes in order to pass the buck.

We all need to take better care of the vineyard that God has carefully prepared for us to live in, as individuals, and just as importantly, as a worldwide community. We all should be working to establish justice for everyone, and caring for one another in love. We can't just leave it to others - the 'they' that we often invoke when something isn't right. Just think how many times we say 'they' need do something about that, whether we mean by 'they', the government, the church authorities, the local council, the boss, the headteacher or whoever. No, we shouldn't be quick to abrogate all responsibility when actually we should be asking ourselves, what can I do to help sort this out. Yes, there will be other people who perhaps 'should' be doing something, but maybe so could we.

Jesus called his first disciples to be active in establishing the Kingdom, and, as members of his church that goes for us too today. We all have responsibilities for looking after God's vineyard, and encouraging the growth of good, rather than 'wild' grapes. We never want to hear Jesus say directly to us 'the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you' rather, we should long to hear the words spoken in the parable of the talents: 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' Amen.

Now pause for your own reflections.

(L): We affirm our faith in the words of the Creed:

All We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came
down from heaven,
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit
and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge
the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son
is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic
and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism
for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.

We now say together:

All You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour,
born of the house of your servant David.

- 1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, ♦
who has come to his people and set them free.
- 2 He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, ♦
born of the house of his servant David.
- 3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old ♦
to save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all that hate us,
- 4 To show mercy to our ancestors, ♦
and to remember his holy covenant.
- 5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
- 6 Free to worship him without fear, ♦
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.
- 7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the
Most High, ♦
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

- 8 To give his people knowledge of salvation ♦
by the forgiveness of all their sins.
- 9 In the tender compassion of our God ♦
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
- 10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the
shadow of death, ♦
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour,
born of the house of your servant David.

Our prayers, today, are written by Sheila Taylor:

Holy God you made our world to be like a vineyard and
choose a people to be its tenants. May we who are now the
workers in that vastly changed vineyard prove to be worthy
of the work you trust us to do in Jesus' name.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Mighty God, we pray for our church; that Christ may be the
cornerstone of all that we do in his name. May we, his
living church be the solid blocks of a spiritual community
which continues to hold fast in an ever secular world. We
thank you for your servants – bishops Andrew and Jo and
our own priests, Father Keith and Rev. Carol for their care,
love and nurture.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Mighty God as we pray for our world we especially pray for
all who like St Paul have suffered the loss of all things for
the sake of their faith in Jesus Christ. We raise before you
organisations like the Barnabas Fund which aids
Christians living under persecution or in threatening
environments with finance and prayers. We join our
prayers with them as we ask for courage and strength for
all persecuted Christians, their communities and churches.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Mighty God, we thank you for the joy of human love, and
for all those among whom we live and work. We pray
particularly for loved ones who worry us with their health,
or circumstances, or life's direction. We pray for those
among our friends and families who do not know you, or
whose faith has been shaken.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Gracious God, friend of those in need, your Son Jesus can
free us from our burdens and heal our bodies and spirits.
We pray for those still burdened, those seeking healing,
those in need within the church and the world. We pray too
for those suffering from the Corona Virus, the Health
Service struggling to cope with the Pandemic and all those
simply living in the fear of contracting it. For all those who
are worried about finance, job security and missing seeing
family and friends, be with them in these difficult times.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Mighty God, we pray for all who have departed this life recently and for those whose anniversary of death fall at this time, bring comfort to those who mourn and healing to the bereaved. We remember: Wyn Long, Richard Stokes, Edna Pearson and June Middleton.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Mighty God, as we move into the coming week help us to travel onwards with our hearts and minds focused on that place where you are beckoning us, onward to Jesus.

Merciful father: accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen

As Jesus taught us, so we pray: Our Father in heaven....

This hymn may be said or sung:

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
Tender to me the promise of his word;
In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his Name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
His mercy sure, from age to age to same;
His holy Name, the Lord, the Mighty One

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight
The hungry fed, the humble lifted high

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
To children's children and for evermore!

Let us pray:

Gracious God,
you call us to fullness of life:
deliver us from unbelief
and banish our anxieties
with the liberating love of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord, we pray that your grace
may always precede and follow us,
and make us continually to be given to all good works;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

All: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us, and all who we love, today and always. Amen.

May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace, and rise with Christ in glory. Amen.



Evening Prayer for this week

O Lord open our lips,
and our mouth shall show forth your praise.

O God make speed to save us.
O Lord, make haste to help us.

A lamp or candle may be lit.

- 1 Bless the Lord, O my soul. ♦
O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness!
- 2 You are clothed with majesty and honour, ♦
wrapped in light as in a garment.
- 3 The sun knows the time for its setting. ♦
You make darkness that it may be night.
- 4 O Lord, how manifold are your works! ♦
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
- 5 When you send forth your spirit, they are created, ♦
and you renew the face of the earth.
- 6 May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; ♦
may the Lord rejoice in his works;
- 7 I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; ♦
I will make music to my God while I have my being.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

That this evening may be holy, good and peaceful,
we pray with one heart and mind:

Silence is kept.

As our evening prayer rises before you, O God,
so may your mercy come down upon us
to cleanse our hearts
and set us free to sing your praise
now and for ever. Amen.

*A Psalm is said: Mon 72; Tue 74; Wed 119 v 81 - 104;
Thurs 78 v 40 - end; Fri 69; Sat 84, ending with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.
Amen.

*Two Scripture Readings now follow (see below). Between
the two readings we say:*

All The glorious grace of God
is freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

- 1 Blessed are you,
the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ♦
for you have blest us in Christ Jesus
with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly
places.
- 2 You chose us to be yours in Christ
before the foundation of the world, ♦
that we should be holy and blameless before you.
- 3 In love you destined us for adoption as your children,
through Jesus Christ, ♦
according to the purpose of your will,
- 4 To the praise of your glorious grace, ♦
which you freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.
- 5 In you, we have redemption
through the blood of Christ, ♦
the forgiveness of our sins,
- 6 According to the riches of your grace, ♦
which you have lavished upon us.

- 7 You have made known to us, in all wisdom and insight, ♦
the mystery of your will,
8 According to your purpose
which you set forth in Christ, ♦
as a plan for the fullness of time,
9 To unite all things in Christ, ♦
things in heaven and things on earth.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All The glorious grace of God
is freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Readings:

- Monday: 2 Chronicles 9 v 1 - 12; Mark 14 v 1 - 11
Tuesday 2 Chron. 10 v 1 to 11 v 4; Mark 14 v 12 - 25
Wednesday: 2 Chronicles 12; Mark 14 v 26 - 42
Thursday: 2 Chron, 13 v 1 to 14 v 1; Mark 14 v 43 - 52
Friday: 2 Chronicles 14 v 2 - end; Mark 14 v 53 - 65
Saturday: 2 Chronicles 15 v 1 - 15; Mark 14 v 66 - end

Gospel Cantic: The Magnificat (The Song of Mary)

All My spirit rejoices in you, O God,
my soul proclaims your greatness.

1) My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit
rejoices in God my Saviour; he has looked with favour on
his lowly servant.

2) From this day all generations will call me blessed; the
Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his
name.

3) He has mercy on those who fear him, from generation
to generation.

4) He has shown strength with his arm and has scattered
the proud in their conceit.

5) Casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting
up the lowly.

6) He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the
rich away empty.

7) He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, to
remember his promise of mercy.

8) The promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and
his children for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.
Amen.

All My spirit rejoices in you, O God,
my soul proclaims your greatness.

*Prayers of thanksgiving are made for the day that is
ending. Intercessions are offered for the church, the
world and for individuals, the sick and the departed.*

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

The Collect for this week (see first page)

This hymn may be said or sung:

Love Divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heav'n, to earth come down;
Fix in us Thy humble dwelling,
All Thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, Thou art all compassion;
Pure, unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit
Into every troubled breast;
Let us all in Thee inherit,
Let us find the promised rest.
Take away the love of sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

Come, Almighty, to deliver,
Let us all Thy life receive;
May Thy presence e'er be with us,
Never more Thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as Thou wouldst approve,
Pray, and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in Thy perfect love.

Finish, then, Thy new creation
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory
Till with Thee we take our place
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.

Kindle in our hearts, O God,
the flame of love which never ceases,
that it may burn in us, giving light to others.
May we shine for ever in your temple,
set on fire with your eternal light,
even your Son Jesus Christ,
our Saviour and our Redeemer. Amen.

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great
mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night,
for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all
evermore. Amen.

May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the
mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.



Bishop's Sermon

Forgetting what is behind and Straining to what is ahead

Philippians 3:4b-14, Bishop Andrew's Sermon, 4.10.20

Hello everyone, and welcome to the Bishop's Sermon on this, the 17th Sunday after Trinity. Today we have some wonderful readings in the Lectionary, including the 10 commandments in Exodus chapter 20 and the parable of the tenants in Matthew chapter 21. But I'd like to focus instead on our epistle reading from Philippians 3:4-14, which is truly the Apostle Paul at his most inspiring: and our theme, taken from that reading, is this: *'forgetting what is behind, and straining to what is ahead'*.

It was one of the most heart-stopping moments of the Rio Olympics: nine laps into the 10,000 metre final, and Mo Farah was accidentally tripped by a team mate and fell. To be tripped in quite such a competitive environment would have wrecked the chances of a lesser athlete, but not Mo Farah. "I wasn't going to let it go," he later reflected. "I got up quickly. I thought about my family. It made me emotional. I thought 'get through, get through'. I believed in myself." And Mo duly recovered to surge past Kenyan Paul Tanui on his way to another Olympic Gold.

'One thing I do', wrote St. Paul: *'Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus'*.

Of course Paul himself had tripped up badly: he had a lot of forgetting to do. For Paul, or Saul as he was then known, had been at least partially responsible for the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and had behaved like a raging bull from then on in, 'breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples', as Luke puts it, and seeking the authority to arrest and imprison followers of 'The Way'. Just as 1000 years before, his *Old Testament* namesake King Saul had chased young David around the desert, seeking desperately to catch and kill him, so this new Saul was just as ruthless as his predecessor in his attempt to wipe out the movement inspired by David's Greater Son. In a letter to young Timothy he was later to describe himself as a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man, indeed as the very 'worst of sinners'.

And here was the most challenging thing of all: that all along Saul, Paul, had *thought* he was doing the right thing. In the first verse of today's reading, he'd talked about his religious credentials as a younger man, the impressive CV that had accompanied him when he applied to study at the school of Gamaliel: how he'd been circumcised on the eighth day, had been born into the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, and an unusually zealous one at that - someone who'd kept the Law to the letter:

truly a man to watch, one of the brightest and best of all the up-and-coming rabbis. And yet the Law of God – or at least his false *interpretation* of the Law of God – was precisely what had driven him in his murderous campaign to wipe out both the Messiah of God and some of the People of God. Just as Jesus had prophesied a little while before – a prophecy that still has haunting resonance in the world of Islamic State and Boko Haram:

'An hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so, they are offering worship to God'.

Indeed, that would be Jesus' own experience, as reflected in our gospel reading today, where the unscrupulous tenants in Jesus' parable resorted to killing the owner's beloved Son.

So when Paul was tripped up by the presence of the Risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus; when that Risen Jesus spoke words that echoed young David's appeal to King Saul's better nature a thousand years' before: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'; Paul's ensuing blindness was symbolic of everything he'd previously stood for. Every entry on his spiritual CV that had previously given him confidence and pride now brought him only guilt and shame. All that credit that he'd thought he'd built up in his heavenly bank account, had now been shifted to the debit column, showing him mightily in debt, a blasphemer, a violent man, the worst of sinners. 'Whatever were gains to me', as he put it, 'I now consider loss'. And yet: something new had mysteriously appeared in the credit column, an entry that wiped out his debts in one fell swoop: what Paul here describes as the 'righteousness that comes through faith' in Christ, and not through slavish obedience to the Law. It was a full seventeen hundred years' later that former slave trader John Newton would write of the

'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me'.

But had that song been around in Paul's day there's no question that he would have sung it from the very depths of his being.

So what now? Prior to his encounter on the Road to Damascus, Paul's ambitions had been clear: to obey the Law of Moses as best he knew how; to rise to prominence in the respectable world of the Pharisees; and to wipe out the early Church. Following his encounter on the Road to Damascus, it was rather less obvious – not least because of the tricky business of persuading Peter, John and the other apostles that he was for real and not a phony: that he really had had a Road to Damascus experience.

Had he been at fault in the way he'd behaved: that was one of the questions he wrestled with. From one perspective he had, but from another he'd simply been acting out of ignorance. Perhaps it didn't really matter, now that he'd been so deeply humbled, and Christ had so clearly called him into his service. And so gradually, two new ambitions began to grow within him, which couldn't have been a greater

contrast than the old ones. The first related to his calling: that through the extraordinary irony of God, his sense of humour if you like, this 'Hebrews of Hebrews', this 'Pharisee of Pharisees' was called to the first apostle to the *Gentiles*; while the second related to the quality and depth of his Christian discipleship:

'I want to know Christ', he wrote, 'and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead'.

In the previous chapter of Philippians, Paul had written of how Christ Jesus, though in very nature God, had made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant and humbling himself even to death on the cross. And in a very real way Paul himself was now being called to follow in Christ's footsteps, leaving behind his respectability as an up-and-coming rabbi, and embracing a way of life in which he'd increasingly be treated as a criminal by the Roman and Jewish authorities alike, and would eventually be executed like his Master – though appropriately, as the Apostle to the *Gentiles*, executed in Rome, the Gentile capital, not Jerusalem, the Jewish one.

That was for later; but for now, Paul was picking himself up from the ground and running once more:

'One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus'.

At that moment he had Mo Farah's determination, there's no question about that, but his motivation was somewhat different. For while Mo's secret, in his own words, was that 'I believed in myself', Paul's secret was rather that 'I stopped believing in myself, and started believing in the One who had called me'. And believe and run he did, straining towards what was ahead until, towards the very end of his life, he was able to write to Timothy again,

'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing'.

And so to us, still in the midst of this Covid crisis, which has so humbled humanity, and all too aware of our own failings and frailties, not least when we reflect on the somewhat tepid nature of our faith in Christ when compared with the mighty Paul of Philippians chapter 3.

We may share with Paul, though, some sense of regret as we look back over our lives thus far – some sense that we've tripped up, or have taken a wrong turn along the way. That may be true of the church where we worship too. And here's where the prescription that Paul wrote for himself, as he struggled to let go of that mental image of Stephen being stoned to death, is quite so powerful:

'One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus'.

So what should be our ambitions as we strain towards what is ahead, especially in this time of such profound change? I guess they should relate to the ambitions of Paul as to his calling and the quality and depth of his Christian discipleship.

This 'apostle to the Gentiles', as he became known, recognized that there were huge swathes of the population of his day who knew nothing about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – and that his calling was to do all that he could to change that, becoming a Jew to Jews and a Gentile to Gentiles, so that by all possible means he might draw people to Christ. That too is our calling, right across the diocese, working and praying together with the other churches around us, as we too face huge swathes of the population whose knowledge and understanding of the Christian gospel could be written on the back of a postage stamp: to the traditionalists being traditionalist, to the contemporaries being contemporary, to the digital generation going digital, so that many might respond to the transforming news of a God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

And to do that we need to commit ourselves to Paul's second ambition: his extraordinary willingness to give his all to the One who had cancelled his debt, who had tripped him up on the Road to Damascus only to set him on his feet again, but this time as a messenger of Good News not Bad News. Church life can so easily become inward-looking and petty, but to be frank we don't have the luxury of that now, if our churches are to have a hope and a future. Instead we need the spirit of a Paul, with his impressive willingness to put away his small ambitions and focus on something far bigger, far more compelling:

'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead'.

Amen.