1 OCTOBER

**Growing in every way more and more like Christ,
who is the head of his body, the church.**

Ephesians 4:15

~~~

She played the violin, was awarded Grade 8 with Distinction and won every school prize she entered for. When she got to university, she auditioned for the orchestra and was amazed to be turned down. 'We have dozens of players as good as you,' she was told, 'and the ones we choose have a maturity and a humility that at present you lack.'

If we are solitary Christians, with just ourselves to compare ourselves to, we won't 'grow in every way like Christ'.[1] *This will only happen as we join a body of other Christians and develop our faith within the fellowship of 'the church'. Otherwise we may start considering our own ideas and insights as truer and more important than mainline Biblical teaching, and go off the rails, maybe taking others with us.*

Christ is like a diamond, and we are his individual facets, each giving off light at a different angle and contributing to the beauty of the whole. This will take time, discipline and humility. We mustn't be impatient.

'Lord Jesus, I may regard myself as specially talented in some way. You call me to be "in every way more and more like Christ". May I become a facet of your diamond, polished by the Spirit and giving the glory back to you.'

MORE LIKE CHRIST

[1] Ephesians 4:15 NRSV.

2 OCTOBER

**What do you have that God hasn't given you?
And if everything you have is from God,
why boast as though it were not a gift?**

1 Corinthians 4:7

~~~

In the background of today's and yesterday's header passages is a well-known quotation from Jeremiah.[2] *Boasting of our talents and good qualities is pointless. They are gifts from God. To imagine they do credit to us is arrogance and folly.*

Paul is trying to deal with critics who think they have a clearer idea of the Christian faith than he does, so they downgrade him and claim superior authority as leaders of the Corinthian church.

Paul invites these self-promoters to join him at the foot of the cross, and fix their eyes on Christ crucified.[3] *Jesus was prepared to endure the poverty, weakness and apparent folly of the cross in order to achieve the purpose of God, which is our salvation. In so doing, he turns the world's values upside-down.*

Who do we think we are? We were rescued from the bin, the tip, the scrapheap. This thought should stop us claiming we are somebody special. 'Everything you have is from God.'

'Lord, you know how much I need this reminder. Save me from pride and boasting in my virtues or achievements.'

EVERYTHING FROM GOD

[2] Jeremiah 9:23-24, 'This is what the Lord says: "Don't let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the Lord."'

[3] 1 Corinthians 2:2, 'I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified.'

3 OCTOBER

There are different kinds of service,
but we serve the same Lord.

1 Corinthians 12:5

~~~

It's probably fair to say that the Bible is 'high church' as regards the value and significance of Christians' service to Jesus Christ, while being 'low church' as to the importance of ritual, liturgy and ceremonial – if these labels have any currency in today's world.

My interests, talents and abilities may differ from yours, but each of us individually and all of us as a team 'serve the same Lord': we take our orders from Christ, we depend upon the Spirit for enabling and direction, we look to the interests of others not ourselves, and all we do is for the glory of God.

The spokes of a bicycle wheel point in different directions, and the rubber hits the road at different points, but they all radiate from the same hub and are held together as one mechanism. Let's remember this as problems arise, personalities clash, numbers rise or fall, finances fluctuate. Jesus is Lord!

'Lord Jesus, you are the Lord of the church. Thank you for the people who make up your people. Help me to appreciate them, work and pray with them, and set aside my own preferences where necessary.'

SERVE THE LORD

4 OCTOBER

God works in different ways,
but it is the same God who does the work in all of us.

1 Corinthians 12:6

~~~

Let's think a little more about our attitudes, hangups and phobias where church is concerned. When you look at the broad span of church history over the past 2000 years, you can't help being amazed at the patience and tolerance of this God of ours. Sure, there have been renegade and heretical sections, and no one church is perfectly aligned to Biblical teaching and spiritual obedience – but Christ's kingdom continues to spread as he graciously 'works in all of us' to play our part in this.

As we grapple with 'fresh expressions of church', and seek to direct our main loyalty not to the world or to our particular group or clan, but to the Lord who died and rose again for us, we may experience pain and tension. Jesus din't have an easy time with his first disciples. The New Testament letters abound with trenchant criticism of erring believers. We all need training, correcting, encouraging. But it's 'the same God' at work.

'Thank you, Lord, that there aren't different Gods or different Spirits. Help me to play my part in your kingdom as it comes here on earth. Heal our divisions and clashes, for your glory.'

THE SAME GOD WORKS

5 OCTOBER

In just a little while, the Coming One will come and not delay.

Hebrews 10:37

~~~

What do Elijah, Nero, King Arthur and Elvis Presley have in common? They have all been expected to return to the world stage and (one assumes) strut their stuff all over again. Is Jesus Christ just another name on this list, or is he of a different order entirely?

There are hundreds of references in the New Testament to the 'parousia' or personal reappearance of the King to the earth. In the Apostles' Creed we say, 'He will come to judge the living and the dead'. How seriously should we take this?

Only God knows what he has in store for us. It's a solemn thought that if Jesus had come back in AD 100 (CE), we would never have been born or had the chance of eternal life. We might not wish to join the cynics or the fanatics – but a bit of sober reflection on the topic wouldn't harm any of us.

'As I look at world events, and the mess we're making of our planet, my natural prayer is that you should come and put everything right. Help me so to behave that I won't be ashamed if you decide to come back tomorrow.'

THE COMING ONE

6 OCTOBER

What did the LORD say to you?

1 Samuel 3:17

~~~

The old priest Eli knows that the Lord has spoken to the boy Samuel, and that it concerns himself and his misbehaving family. How does God speak to us?

Alpine guides are supposed to know when it's safe for their party to cross a snow bridge over a crevasse. This isn't just interesting information, it's a life-or-death matter: do I put my full weight on this fragile-looking snow carpet? It all depends on how much trust I put in the guide's words.

Samuel's 'Speak, your servant is listening'[4] is his response to God's voice. This may come to us through the Bible, our consciences, our church, a friend or sometimes through natural phenomena. It is up to us whether we take it seriously, or not.

'Lord Jesus, you have never let me down. Make your will and your word clear to me. Such a lot depends on it.'

SPEAK, LORD

[4] 1 Samuel 3:9.

7 OCTOBER

**The blessing of the LORD makes a person rich,
and he adds no sorrow with it.**

Proverbs 10:22

~~~

'Blessing' isn't a word we use much, or if we do, it can sound quaint. If we sneeze, someone may comment, 'Bless you!' (derived from times when a sneeze was a sign of the plague). 'The blessing' may conclude a church service.

In the Old Testament material wealth was considered to be a sign of God's favour. Obedience to God would make a person well off, healthy and fortunate in all kinds of ways. The New Testament adds a second, spiritual layer to the word: Christ's gift of eternal life for those who believe.

We can't expect faith in God to bring us automatic prosperity or a pain-free existence. But we can be grateful that his plan is for our ultimate good.[5] We can also seek to be a blessing to others.[6] Our generosity isn't to impress God or to extract blessing from him, it's to express our love and gratitude to him as we share it with those around.

'Lord, you have been so good to me. May I in my turn be a positive benefit to others, in my family, my relationships, my workplace and my community.'

THE LORD'S BLESSING

[5] Jeremiah 29:11, '"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."'
[6] Acts 20:35, 'You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."'

8 OCTOBER

He set my feet on solid ground.

Psalm 40:2

~~~

Sometimes (but thankfully rarely) we see in the news that a sinkhole several feet deep has opened up in a residential street and families have had to abandon their homes, maybe for months. Is there solid ground under our faith in Christ, or might we have to abandon it as unreliable?

The Psalmist has been in deep trouble.[7] 'My sins pile up so high I can't see my way out,' he cries.[8] At such times we need a God who saves us. Not good advice, not moral uplift, not pious hopes, but actual practical rescue. Our ground is sinking under our feet. Our only hope is Jesus who died for us and rose again. He has proved superior to the downward pull of sin, death and despair. He is there for us.

There is nothing to fear. We are not suddenly going to get swallowed up by some fiendish sinkhole. 'On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.'[9]

'It's so easy to take my eyes off Christ when I feel I'm slipping or drowning, like Peter trying to walk on water. At such times I look to you, Lord, alone for rescue.'

ON SOLID GROUND

[7] Psalm 40:2, 'He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire.'
[8] Psalm 40:12.
[9] From the hymn by Edward Mote, 'My hope is built on nothing less'.

9 OCTOBER

The LORD's promises are pure.

Psalm 12:6

~~~

Our hiking party was halfway down the Grand Canyon and we were thirsty. We found a secret pool formed from water filtered through 1500 feet of rock over millions of years, tasting sweet and 'pure', not the kind travellers are warned against sampling. The Bible is like this. It has been drinking water for the world for thousands of years, only neglected by those who prefer the 'stolen water'[10] of falsehood and self-indulgence.

The apostle Paul tells us to 'fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable'.[11] This isn't achieved by lingering over glossy magazines and doubtful internet videos. If we have trouble with our thought life, we can ask the Lord Jesus to show us himself in his word. We can take regular, deep draughts of this amazing treasury of heavenly 'promises', filtered down to us in accessible and (if we work at it) understandable language.

'Loving Father, thank you for the Bible. Forgive me if I've neglected it for more superficially attractive material. Teach me how to weave your promises into my thinking and so find you in your word.'

THE LORD'S PROMISES

[10] Proverbs 9:17.
[11] Philippians 4:8.

10 OCTOBER

Pray like this: 'Our Father in heaven.'

Matthew 6:9

~~~

For the next few days we will be browsing the Lord's Prayer clause by clause. It's so familiar, in its different versions, that we tend to skate over it without really thinking. Here's a chance to go deeper.

Jesus taught us to call God 'Our Father'. He created us to be his family, but like the younger son in the parable, or the elder son for that matter, we have become estranged and distant .[12] 'Heaven' has become a foreign country instead of being our natural home.

So he invites us to return. 'To all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God … reborn with a birth that comes from God.'[13] Promises like this are our birth certificates.

We have the right to approach God in prayer as 'our Father'. This is reassuring and precious. Requests, intercessions, yearnings, pleadings, thanksgiving, heartfelt praise – all are part of this permitted conversation with the One who loves us.

'Lord, teach me to pray. To trust your love, live by your promises and explore your intimacy. Not as a duty, but as my deepest joy.'

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

[12] Luke 15:11-32.
[13] John 1:12-13.

11 OCTOBER

May your name be kept holy.

Matthew 6:9

~~~

The first three requests in the Lord's Prayer are all about God. They take our mind off ourselves and direct us towards the eternal One who is our Father, Creator and Lover. Our first concern is for his 'name', which is his true character and the reason for our worship

His name is not honoured, or 'kept holy', on earth and amongst mankind. The old word is 'hallowed', meaning that he deserves a unique reverence as Someone who has a blazing passion for goodness, purity and truth, and who hates all that is evil. Even at their best, human religion and systems of worship fall far short of giving God the honour he deserves.

Yet our Lord tells us to pray along with him that this vision will come true – in the world, in the church and in our own lives. When the new heaven and earth are revealed, it will be fulfilled.[14] *Our prayers aren't in vain; in fact, they may even be an essential means of bringing it about.*

'Hallowed be your name. If only people knew what you are really like! If only my life could reflect something of your holiness! Lord, Holy Spirit, please make this come true.'

YOUR HOLY NAME

[14] 2 Peter 3:13, 'We are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness.'

12 OCTOBER

May your Kingdom come soon.

Matthew 6:10

~~~

The Lord's Prayer continues with a second request, that the Kingdom of God will come ('soon' is added by NLT to underline its urgency). Once again we are called into partnership with Jesus' own passionate desire for everything to come right on earth, as it is in heaven.

But didn't he say that the Kingdom was already among us?[15] *Yes, it is spreading and growing unseen, like yeast in a lump of dough, and one day it will replace all the kingdoms of the earth and will stand for ever.*[16] *But we are living, and praying, in the meanwhile.*

All our preaching, teaching, studying, visiting and meeting people's practical needs should be soaked in the 'kingdom come' prayer. The King is coming soon, and we want to be ready for him.

'Your Kingdom come. May Jesus be known and truly honoured as rightful King. May the church serve your purposes here on earth. May my heart crown Christ as my King.'

YOUR KINGDOM COME

[15] Luke 17:21.
[16] Matthew 13:31-33; Daniel 2:44.

13 OCTOBER

May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

Matthew 6:10

~~~

The third item on God's shopping-list, the trio of requests for God's side of the situation, seems a bit odd. Surely God is able to do anything he wants?[17] *Of course he is! But there is resistance to his will, and we are called to pray that this resistance should be finally and permanently eradicated.*

It is also a prayer that we ourselves should be aligned to his will. We continually need words from God, examples of holy men and women, enablings of the Holy Spirit, to teach, remind and energise us into not only understanding what he wants of us, but outworking it in daily practice.

This isn't a fatalistic resignation to a destiny set in stone. It is cooperating with God in bringing in his good and perfect rule throughout his visible and invisible universe. It may involve hard wrestling with stubborn obstacles. But it could take us to surprising and exciting places.

'Lord and heavenly Father, save me from my own distorted will. Align me with your thinking, your loving purposes. Keep me alert to nudges from your Spirit today.'

YOUR WILL BE DONE

[17] Daniel 4:35, 'He does as he pleases among the angels of heaven and among the people of the earth'.

14 OCTOBER

Give us today the food we need.

Matthew 6:11

~~~

The 'Our Father' prayer now moves from the name, kingdom and will of God to our own needs for bread, forgiveness and deliverance. Daily bread *means food that will sustain us and our dependants. We are to be beggars in relation to God, whatever our place in society or in the human and material food chain.*

Do we grumble or express discontentment? We are urged to 'be satisfied with what you have'.[18] *We were discussing this in a Lent course and someone came up with the maxim, 'Enough to live, enough to give'. We may need to consider a simple and sensible fasting regime to rein in our appetites and reduce our BMI.*

Most of us (not all) have no trouble in meeting our daily needs. Bad times may come to disturb our complacency. If so, we need to hear Paul's realistic philosophy: 'We brought nothing with us when we came into this world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it.'[19]

'Lord, you invite me to bring my basic needs to you. Teach me self-discipline, if that's what I need. Show me, too, how to dig deeper into my pocket to meet the needs of others.'

BE SATISFIED

[18] Hebrews 13:5.
[19] 1 Timothy 6:17.

15 OCTOBER

Forgive us our sins,
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.

Matthew 6:12

~~~

Forgiveness is release from a moral or spiritual debt. It operates vertically, in our relation to God; and it operates horizontally, in our relations with each other.

Jesus is offering us God's forgiveness, by virtue not of our own goodness or deserts, but through his own sacrifice on the cross. At the same time, he insists that we, as forgiven people, extend that same tolerance to others. But what if some of us are hurting so badly we can't do this?

To forgive is not to press charges. We are not God. So he gives us the authority to act as if there were no charges. Even if the other is unrepentant? Yes. Otherwise the evil doubles and redoubles.

To pray the Lord's prayer, and to mean it, is to bring the Holy Spirit's power to bear on our problem. We share it with our Father, not hug it to ourselves. Miracles are his norm.

'Heavenly Father, there are burdens I can't bear by myself. I need to hand them over to you. Release me from their weight, as you say you can.'

FATHER, FORGIVE

16 OCTOBER

Don't let us yield to temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.

Matthew 6:13

~~~

In the old Greek story, Odysseus wanted to hear the alluring Sirens' song without getting shipwrecked. So he had himself bound to the mast and his rowers stuffed their ears with wax. That way he heard the song without paying the penalty.

In contrast, our Lord tells us not to flirt with temptation, but when it comes, to depend upon him to rescue us.

What if our course sometimes leads perilously close to the cliff edge? Is it God, or the evil one, who is leading us on?

Today's society has its own Sirens' songs, and it will always be a minefield of moral choices, which we will need the Lord's guidance and help to get through.[20]

'"Still let me ever watch and pray, and feel that I am frail; that if the tempter cross my way, yet he may not prevail."'[21]

RESCUE US FROM EVIL

---

[20] Romans 14:4, 'With the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval.'
[21] From the hymn by Isaac Williams, 'Be thou my guardian and my guide'.

17 OCTOBER

Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever.

Matthew 6:13 (fn)

~~~

In the Lord's Prayer we have prayed first for God's concerns and then for ours. Its final clause lifts our eyes from our earthly cares to the eternal perspective. The kingdoms of this world come and go, but God's reign is for ever.

David's prayer at the end of his life expresses the same idea: 'Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory and the majesty. Everything in the heavens and on earth is yours, O Lord, and this is your kingdom.'[22]

We need this double perspective. Without it, we may leave the comfort of our devotions or our worship only to get knocked over by the demands and pressures of daily life. Or we bury ourselves in the short-term viewpoint of the media and social chatter, and fail to see the wider picture.

One day we will see how true this is and always has been. Meanwhile we carry on praying.

'Lord Jesus, thank you for your prayer. Help me to live it out after praying it in.'

YOUR KINGDOM, POWER, GLORY

[22] 1 Chronicles 29:11.

18 OCTOBER

Amen.

Matthew 6:13 fn

~~~

'Amen' isn't just a formulaic ending to a prayer. It's a Hebrew word meaning 'truth'. Jesus often used it to emphasise his teaching: 'I tell you the truth'. In praying it acts as a double affirmation - it's our 'yes' to God's 'yes'.

This lies at the heart of 'Promise and Prayer'. God's promise is his unbreakable assertion that he means what he says. Our response is a wholehearted acceptance of that promise.

In a strange passage in one of his letters Paul says, 'All God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!" And through Christ, our "Amen" (which means "Yes") ascends to God for his glory.'[23] *Christ is God's 'Yes!' to everything he's said and everything we ask or need.*

Paul goes on to say that the Holy Spirit has been placed in us 'as a guarantee of everything he has promised us.'[24] *We don't have to work up certainty in ourselves. When God says 'True!', we reply 'True!' – and the Spirit echoes 'True!' in the very depths of our being.*

'I'm not leaving my brains at the door when I read the Bible and pray. I'm taking God at his word, and staking my life on it. What I need isn't more sophistication, it's more childlike simplicity.'

AMEN MEANS YES

[23] 2 Corinthians 1:20. 'Every promise of God finds its affirmative in him' (J B Phillips).

[24] 2 Corinthians 1:22.

19 OCTOBER

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ?
Any comfort from his love?
Any fellowship together in the Spirit?

Philippians 2:1

~~~

'Christians shouldn't ask such questions.' But Paul was in prison, where 'encouragement', 'comfort' and 'fellowship' were in short supply. We may have times when we can echo his words. Life isn't much fun, to be quite honest. Does this mean we're in danger of losing our faith?

We didn't join up with Christ in order to have an easy life. His terms and conditions weren't in small print or rattled off at high speed. He made it quite clear that anyone who came to him would have to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him[25]*.*

But that's not the whole story. On the plus side of the account there are three huge positives. We 'belong to Christ' because Jesus has ransomed us to be his own possession and come back from the grave to find us. We know God's 'love' which has been from eternity and has reached out to draw us to himself. We have 'the Spirit' who is closer to us than any outward circumstances and who links us with his people throughout time and space.

'Is anyone there?' Yes, the whole Godhead is there for us.

'My faith does burn low at certain times. I so easily forget all your benefits. You are the strength of my heart[26].'

I BELONG TO CHRIST

[25] Luke 9:23.
[26] Psalm 73:26, 'My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine for ever'.

20 OCTOBER

May the LORD your God accept your sacrifice.

2 Samuel 24:23

~~~

It's a serious matter if your passport is refused at the border. You must go at once to your consular representative to get it sorted out. So what is the likelihood of my passport being refused when I apply to get into the Kingdom of God?

Each of us has a criminal record before God.[27] *Only Jesus can claim complete perfection where sin is concerned.*[28] *If I trust in my own credentials, I risk certain rejection; if I present his, I am immediately accepted.*

No sacrifice we make is anything like enough. But Jesus' full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice[29] *atones for the sins of the whole world. So what further sacrifice can we make? Gratitude and thanksgiving, and whatever I can do for others.*[30]

'Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your cross. Thank you for exchanging records with me. Not my faith, but your merits alone can win acceptance before God. Wonderful!'

ACCEPTABLE TO GOD

[27] Romans 3:23, 'For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.'
[28] John 8:46, 'Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin?'
[29] From the Book of Common Prayer.
[30] Hebrews 13:15-16, 'Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name. And don't forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God.'

21 OCTOBER

**Slaves are not greater than their master.
Nor is the messenger more important
than the one who sends the message.**

John 13:16

~~~

It's natural for each of us to feel we are the centre of the universe. This may stem from early infancy when we imagine we are the sole focus of our parents' attention. But it's an ingrained condition that is only overcome by meeting Jesus and being transformed by him.

Jesus said, 'I am among you as one who serves.'[31] *At supper the evening before his death, he wrapped himself in a towel and washed the disciples' feet*[32]*..He directly challenges our ideas of importance and supremacy. We need cleansing, and he alone can supply this.*

We may feel we are losing out by being Christians. On the contrary, Jesus was the one who lost out, became a reject and a total loser, endured the pain and dishonour of the cross so we self-important rebels could be raised to the status of children of God and receive an eternal inheritance. But only if we first serve him as his 'slaves' and 'messengers', in true humility and self-forgetfulness.

'Lord and Master, you gave your life to ransom us all. Forgive me for my self-centredness. I want to serve you while I'm on this earth. Wash my feet, so I can wash others' feet.'

ONE WHO SERVES

[31] Luke 22:27.
[32] John 13:4-5.

22 OCTOBER

**The LORD has made the heavens his throne;
from there he rules everything.**

Psalm 103:19

~~~

Listening to the news, reading the headlines, is fine until it directly affects us. Then we start blaming God for the state the world's in. How could he allow all this to happen?

If 'the Lord rules everything', then it's not for us to complain that he's doing things the wrong way. So do we simply shrug our shoulders and resign ourselves to whatever he ordains?

We can do far more. We can acknowledge his sovereignty over the whole course of our lives. Rather than moaning about our lot, we can walk confidently with the One who 'has made the heavens his throne', knowing that his purposes are ultimately good and that evil will not have the last word.

There is no other God.[33] *'Christ must reign until he humbles all his enemies beneath his feet.'*[34] *Lord, reign in me today!*

'I admit I get a buzz from complaining about the state of the world. Help me to hang on to faith in your overall sovereignty and control. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

HE RULES EVERYTHING

[33] Isaiah 45:5.
[34] 1 Corinthians 15:25.

23 OCTOBER

The Spirit alone gives eternal life.

John 6:63

~~~

Certain so-called rare-earth elements are highly valued for their use in electronics and defence systems. China controls 90% of the global supply of these, which makes her easily the most important provider.

Jesus makes the jaw-dropping claim that the Spirit of God is the sole provider of 'eternal life'. At Pentecost Peter quoted God's promise that he would 'show us the way of life',[35] and linked it with the gift of the Holy Spirit.[36]

Jesus' resurrection demonstrates that he 'alone' is our provider of eternal life. He offers, as a free 'gift', to come and live within us by his Spirit. Paul confirms this in his memorable phrase, 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.'[37]

Have we come to him for this most precious of all gifts?

'I may not know much about my need for rare-earths, but I do acknowledge my need for eternal life. Thank you that I don't have to go to a foreign power to find it. Thank you that I can have Christ in me, my only hope of glory.'

SPIRIT OF LIFE

[35] Acts 2:28 quoting Psalm 16:11, 'You have shown me the way of life, and you will fill me with the joy of your presence.'
[36] Acts 2:38.
[37] Colossians 1:27 NIV.

24 OCTOBER

When the poor and needy search for water and there is none, and their tongues are parched with thirst, then I, the LORD, will answer them.

Isaiah 41:17

~~~

This wonderful promise, and its fulfilment in our experience, depends upon our realising we are 'poor and needy', and that our chief desire is not for material prosperity or a feeling of psychological wellbeing, but for the living God himself.

Built into our lives is a sense of incompleteness. Without God life is ultimately devoid of meaning and purpose. Do we have to wait for heaven for this, or can we find it here and now?

Surely it's both. We long for everything that is wrong to be put right. We long for Christ to come back and bring in a new universe of love, joy and perfect righteousness.

Because we are in our present bodies on earth, our enjoyment of God's presence may fluctuate. Our walk with Christ may involve painful episodes. But we have the assurance that 'I, the Lord, will answer them'. Our need, therefore, is to stay 'thirsty' and to keep asking.

'Lord, it is my chief complaint that my love is weak and faint. Yet I love thee, and adore. O for grace to love you more!'[38]

I WILL ANSWER

[38] From the hymn by William Cowper, 'Hark my soul, it is the Lord'.

25 OCTOBER

The end of the world is coming soon.

1 Peter 4:7

~~~

'The end of the world.' What does it mean? Astronomers predict the end of our universe in five billion years, which is interesting but hardly worrying. But 'soon'? Harold Wilson said, 'A week is a long time in politics', reminding us that the impact of events isn't down to how long they take to arrive but their significance once they occur.

The shortness of human life, the fragility of mortal existence, the impermanence of earthly affairs all combine to alert us not to place reliance on material things. Jesus repeatedly warned that his return at the end of time might not be immediate, but it would be sudden and unexpected[39].

If we discovered that Christ's second coming was due to take place in 24 hours' time, what difference would it make to our practical arrangements? Doubtful areas of our life would need to be instantly cleared up. We might want to tell as many people as possible. We would have emotional embraces with our loved ones.

How ready are we?

'I don't want to panic, but neither do I want to be complacent. Lord, we want you to return to put everything right. You've told us to pray about this. Help me to be alert and to live my life in the light of your presence.'

I AM COMING SOON[40]

[39] See for example Luke 21:8-9.
[40] Revelation 22:20.

26 OCTOBER

Guard your heart.

Malachi 2:15

~~~

The context of this urgent appeal is unfaithfulness in marriage. Originally written some 450 years before the Christian era, it is equally applicable to our age. We should not give away our affections to every desirable object. We should attend to our 'heart' or 'spirit' (ESV). The Message has, 'Guard the spirit of marriage within you. Don't cheat on your spouse.'

These are tough words. We all have ups and downs in our relationships. Marriages do break down. But an epidemic of marital unfaithfulness can never be good for any society. As an article in today's paper says, 'Infidelity is infidelity, whatever one's sexual orientation'. The church needs living examples of marriages that work well. At the same time, whether married or (through choice or circumstances) single, we need discipline, a resolute attitude to our wandering thoughts and self-indulgence, and a heart that consciously yields day by day to the Spirit of Christ within us.

'Lord, thank you for human love and friendship.I yield my heart and my spirit to you. Help me to be self-disciplined in my thoughts and affections.'

GUARD YOUR HEART

27 OCTOBER

Blessings fall on any people you bless.

Numbers 22:6

~~~

We have a problem with privilege. The privilege of education, wealth, talent, family, fortune. The lucky few! Does this include God's blessing? If someone is a member of God's people, is this simply a matter of their number coming up in some heavenly lottery? Or have they done something to deserve it?

These words were originally spoken by king Balak of Moab to the prophet Balaam. Balak wanted Balaam to curse Israel, but the opposite happened, and the prophet's blessing went on to include a prophecy of Christ.[41] *This is the key to the whole mysterious story.*

God's blessings come to us in Christ, not from our own merits. It's by God's grace alone that we are saved.[42] *This 'blessing' is for the whole world, not just a lucky few.*[43] *This is the message of the entire Bible. Because Jesus took the curse for us, we (that is, anybody) can inherit eternal life. Do we have a problem with that?*

'"Saviour, if of Zion's city I, through grace, a member am, let the world deride or pity, I will glory in thy name."[44] Such a privilege! But I don't want to hug it to myself. Use me to bless others, as I live in gratitude and hope.'

PEOPLE YOU BLESS

[41] Numbers 24:17, 'A star will rise from Jacob, a sceptre will emerge from Israel.'
[42] Ephesians 2:5.

[43] Galatians 3:8.
[44] Hymn by John Newton, 'Glorious things of thee are spoken'.

28 OCTOBER

I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy.

Luke 10:19

~~~

The 'cold war' is so called because instead of the flames of actual conflict, there is warfare by other means. Electronic interference, spy services, psychological sapping of morale, submarines prowling around completely undetected.

For Jesus and Paul, the devil is a personal being whom they encountered and are warning us about. He is a malevolent and powerful spirit intent upon defeating and destroying God's people, and putting himself in the place of God, hopelessly ambitious as that might seem.

Jesus promises the seventy-two (not just the twelve, so they represent all of us) 'authority' over this enemy, meaning that by resisting him, denying him any foothold in our lives, 'conquering evil by doing good'[45] *and rising each time we fall*[46]*, we can achieve the victory. 'The enemy' is not going to win in the end.*

'Lord Jesus, I realise there is a war on.You have called those who belong to you to join you in opposing the enemy. Help me to play my part in your campaign, and strengthen me where I need it.'

AUTHORITY OVER THE ENEMY

[45] Romans 12:21.
[46] Micah 7:8, 'Do not gloat over me, my enemies! For though I fall, I will rise again. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.'

29 OCTOBER

David found strength in the LORD his God.

1 Samuel 30:6

~~~

David was in deep trouble. Some raiders had burnt his home town while he was on campaign and gone off taking his and his men's families, and he was being bitterly criticised. He took swift action to retrieve all the captured people and property – but only because he first sought and 'found strength in' the God he trusted to be in ultimate control of a very nasty situation.

Things may happen to us which bring us to our knees. We feel completely unable to cope. The emergency may or may not be our direct fault, but we instinctively feel that the Lord has withdrawn his favour and protection. It's a time when our faith in his promises is put under severe strain – if we can remember any of them.

David's testimony, time and again, is that he 'found' the strength and help he needed.[47] *God is not going to abandon us when we need him most. We and David have the same Lord.*

'Lord, there are times when I feel anything but strong and confident. Thank you that I can depend on your promises no matter how desperate I get. You are my God.'

DAVID FOUND STRENGTH

[47] For instance, Psalm 18:18-19, 'They attacked me at a moment when I was in distress, but the Lord supported me. He led me to a place of safety; he rescued me because he delighted in me.'

30 OCTOBER

Catch all the foxes, those little foxes, before they ruin the vineyard of love, for the grapevines are blossoming.

Song 2:15

~~~

In this biblical love-song the relationship between the infatuated couple is compared to a 'vineyard' that is vulnerable to pests like 'little foxes', which can dig holes around the growing plants and undermine the whole root system.

The Sufi poet Rumi said: 'Always check your inner state with the lord of your heart'. I may be the last person to be aware of things in me that spoil my relationship with Christ and with others. The Holy Spirit knows exactly what these are. Check things out regularly with him.

Whether this applies to a deep friendship, family relations, our fellowship with other Christians or our colleagues at work, little words, actions, attitudes may cause disruption and ultimately serious disharmony.

'Thank you, Lord Jesus, that I can come to you to sort things out. Help me with those elusive little foxes. Guard what I think and what I say.'

CATCH THE FOXES

31 OCTOBER

Do as you have promised.

2 Samuel 7:25

~~~

Our yacht was anchored in a small bay for the night, but our captain didn't trust the seabed. He was right; in the morning we found we had drifted nearer to the rocks.

In the Roman catacombs an anchor regularly appears among the early Christian graffiti. It stands for Jesus, our one hope of security with God. He is like a line running from us into God's presence, holding us firmly to God.

Are we afraid our faith might drift in the darkness of uncertainty and conflicting currents of opinion? Is it placed securely in God's 'promises'? If so, it depends not on our strength of mind or will, but on God's faithful character.

He means what he says. He has sent Jesus as 'the Word.'[48] *The Bible may contain riddles and obscurities, but its main message is perfectly clear. If our anchor is Jesus, we won't drift during the night.*

'As I reach the end of another month, I rejoice with David at the faithfulness of your promises. Your word has come true again and again. I trust you to keep my faith firm.'

PERFORM YOUR PROMISE

[48] John 1:1.
~~~