

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

**A series of short articles on each Book of
the Bible by the friars of Holy Cross Priory,
Leicester**

THE NEW TESTAMENT

MMXI

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

1 – The Gospel According to St Matthew

CHRISTIANITY reveres four Gospels, no more and no less. Only the texts according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are accepted as inspired witnesses to the life, deeds and words of Jesus Christ, especially what he accomplished for our salvation — that, above all else, is the ‘good news’ or Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even by the middle of the second century, the Gospels, called “the memoirs of the Apostles”, were used alongside the books of the Old Testament in the Church’s liturgy. The Gospel is therefore the Gospel of Jesus. To distinguish the Four Gospels in the Bible, they are designated as “the Gospel according to...”. Matthew’s account is always numbered as the first, and appears always in that order.

The earliest Christians unanimously held that the writer of this Gospel was none other than the apostle Matthew, also called Levi, the former tax collector. Certainly the internal evidence of this Gospel does not make us doubt this identification. First, it was written by a Jewish believer in Jesus, steeped in the biblical and religious traditions of Israel. Secondly, the author was most likely native to Palestine, showing bilingual competence in writing in Greek and in translating from Hebrew directly, with an easy familiarity with people and places in the Holy Land. Thirdly, there are multiple references to currency, debts, business transactions, and financial matters (17:24-27; 18:23-35; 20:1-16; 25:14-30; 26:25; 27:3-10).

Matthew’s Gospel, in twenty-eight chapters, consists of five main sections of stories, separated by five main speeches, and the whole Gospel is framed by an introductory prologue on Jesus’ genealogy and infancy, and a climactic epilogue of his last week on earth. Each of the five speech sections concludes with the expression “when Jesus finished saying/teaching” (7:8; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1), which serves as a bridge back to the narrative/story sections. This literary technique highlights the emphasis on Jesus’ words and deeds in parallel and as complementary.

Some see in this Matthew’s attempt to present five ‘books’ of the Messiah, as a kind of new Torah (the Jewish Law — made up of the

first five books of the Bible, attributed to Moses). Jesus, like a new Moses, gives his own Torah, and in choosing twelve Apostles, he symbolizes the twelve ‘tribes’ of his new Israel, the Church. It is in Matthew that Jesus unambiguously calls it “his” Church, which he founds as a new kingdom.

This is a central theme: “the Kingdom of Heaven”. A key expression, it occurs more than thirty times in Matthew, on the lips of Jesus (4:17) and in the preaching of John the Baptist (3:2) and the Apostles (10:7). The Kingdom is a claim that God the Father is working through Jesus, the Son of Man, to establish his will on earth as it is in heaven. The Kingdom is moral, ecclesial and eschatological.

The Kingdom is moral in that it calls for a response to Jesus. Hearers are summoned to repentance (4:17), followed by a lifetime of discipleship, in which seeking the surpassing righteousness of God (5:20) is the highest priority (6:33). This righteousness is exemplified in the Beatitudes (5:3-10), and a deepened explication of the Law of Moses (5:21-48). One must follow the Golden Rule (7:12), live humbly (18:1-4), with a willingness to forgive (6:14-15; 18:23-35). Commitment to prayer (6:5-13), fasting (6:16-18) and works of mercy (6:2-4; 25:35-40) is essential. Jesus’ teachings are the foundation (7:24-27) of a life leading to eternal blessedness (25:31-46).

The Kingdom is ecclesial in that its saving power is made present on earth through the Church (16:18; 18:17). The authority to bind and loose in the Kingdom is given first to Peter as its chief steward and ‘key-bearer’ (16:19), and to the twelve Apostles as a group (18:18-19). The Apostles extend the Kingdom by their preaching (10:7) and sacramental acts (28:18-20).

The Kingdom is eschatological in that its fulfilment is ultimately in the future. Its presence in the world as the Church is a prelude to its full manifestation at the end of time. Thus the ‘coming’ of the Kingdom waits for Christ’s return in glory (16:28). For this the Church hopes, prays (6:10) and prudently prepares (25:1-13). In the end, Christ will separate the righteous from the wicked and damn the latter; but to the former he will give the Kingdom as their everlasting inheritance (25:31-46).

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

2 – The Gospel According to St Mark

FOR many people, Mark's Gospel is not their favourite. Mark doesn't include our favourite parables of Jesus (like the Good Samaritan) and he doesn't tell us anything about the early life of Jesus, as Matthew and Luke both do. On the other hand, Mark gives us an extremely attractive and vivid portrait of Jesus and focusses on the most important part of Jesus' life, the journey to Jerusalem, and his death, Resurrection and Ascension.

Mark's Gospel is one of the synoptic (which means "with the same eye") Gospels, meaning that he narrates most of the same events as Matthew and Luke. These overlapping accounts help to give us confidence that the events told us in the Gospels really happened, that the stories they tell of Jesus are reliable.

Nevertheless, Mark tells his story in his own way. His is the shortest Gospel. It's a kind of summary of the most important parts of the Gospel story, and it's written in very basic and direct language. Mark doesn't write in a beautiful, literary style. On the contrary, he does lots of the things that teachers tell their students not to do when writing. But what he produces is a very direct and exciting account of Jesus' life.

Mark over-uses certain words and phrases. One of his favourites is "and immediately". Jesus does this and then immediately he does that and immediately he does the other. It gives his Gospel almost a breathless quality and emphasises just how urgent Jesus' task of preaching the Gospel and healing the sick was.

What is this Gospel that Jesus has to preach? It's about the kingdom of God. Right at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells us, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel." Jesus helps people to learn what the kingdom of God means, partly by his parables, and partly by his healing of sick and casting out of demons.

And Jesus invites us all to share in that mission of his, becoming his disciples and preaching the kingdom of God by preaching and by caring for the sick. After himself preaching and healing, Jesus sends

out his apostles to preach and gives them power to heal the sick and to cast out demons.

The apostles didn't understand this mission, and ultimately Judas would betray Jesus and Peter deny him. Mark is quite hard on the apostles, and perhaps especially on Peter. Perhaps he just wants to show how even Jesus' closest friends could fail in their following of him. Mark would have known, of course, that Peter was forgiven by Jesus, and made the great first leader of his Church, so he knew that this failure was not the end, but he shows how Jesus is pure-hearted and focussed on his mission, a mission he shares even with people whom he knows will fail.

Jesus' preaching about the kingdom and his healing, however, are only part of the most important way in which Mark presents Jesus as telling about that kingdom: Jesus' own life is an extended parable about the kingdom. To understand the kingdom, we have to try to understand the life of Jesus, as preacher and healer, but most importantly, as dying on the cross and rising to new life. Jesus is shown to be the long-awaited Messiah, but not the messiah many Jews were expecting, not a powerful military leader, but a suffering servant, as promised by the prophets.

Almost half of Mark's Gospel is devoted to telling us the story of Christ's passion, from his entry into Jerusalem, through the trial and sufferings of Jesus, to his crucifixion and death, and ultimately his Resurrection and Ascension. Mark's passion is extremely dark, written almost like a nightmare, a sequence of events in which all the human failings of the leaders of the people, of the people themselves, and even of the apostles, play out. And yet, it's in the midst of this awfulness, that Jesus' true kingship is seen.

Mark's writing about the Resurrection is mysterious. He doesn't have a lot of post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus, but that doesn't mean his belief in the Resurrection wasn't powerful. He focusses us on the empty tomb, a tremendous sign of Jesus' victory over death, but for the disciples at first, a source of fear. Jesus upbraids his disciples for their lack of belief, and sends them out, once again, to preach the Gospel. And Mark ends by telling us that they did so, and their words were confirmed by the miracles that followed.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

3 – The Gospel According to St Luke

THE name Luke comes up two or three times in the writings we have about Jesus. St Paul mentions ‘a dear friend, Luke, the doctor’, and on another occasion writes ‘only Luke is with me’. Most importantly, we have this gospel, named ‘after Luke’.

It is introduced as written for someone called ‘Theophilus’. Another treatise we have, the ‘Acts’, or ‘News’, of the Apostles – is also offered to ‘Theophilus’. It means ‘God lover’. We might say it means you, and me, everyone who loves God.

This is speculation of course. There is a lot of speculation about the books of the Bible. This is to be done ‘sensibly’ – with ‘religious’, and not just ‘common’, sense.

There is also a very old and lovely legend that Luke ‘painted a picture’ of Our Lady. There are certainly strong ‘family history’ details in Luke’s gospel. He knows all about Elizabeth, and the conception and birth of John the Baptist. He tells of the conception, and birth, of Jesus, in great detail, and repeats episodes of His infancy and childhood. All this could have been known only ‘in the family’.

As we read or hear these in Luke’s gospel it brings us, too, into the holy family. Luke helps us to become very familiar with Jesus. He gives us a detailed account of the His temptations. This could have come only from Jesus Himself. These temptations are a great encouragement for us all. So many of us feel so unworthy, because of the thoughts and feelings we have. In despair, we give up faith in ourselves, hope of doing any good, loving others.

A girl once told me she was nearly always full of thoughts of pride, and envy, and anger, and lust. So, how could she be a decent person, never mind a ‘good Catholic’? All I could say was that she felt able to tell me all this, and still be friends with me. Wouldn’t it be the same, or even more, with God her Father? These were temptations.

Jesus' answer to temptation is to remember the great sayings in the Bible that we can 'take to heart', and use; in argument, with the Devil; and in prayer, to God our Father. We can turn our backs on 'Satan' and 'all his empty promises', and then find – God.

The gospel of Luke is full of Jesus' understanding, forgiveness and encouragement. Luke gives us the very honest story, of the feelings that Saint Peter had, when Jesus met him, and showed such power, in helping him catch so many fish. 'Lord, leave me; I'm a sinner'. It's what we all feel, called to do something good: 'I can't'. We can; and much more, if we follow Jesus in all the ways He shows us.

Luke tells us the story of the effect on the sinful tax-collector in Jericho. Jesus, astonishingly, knows him, and invites Himself to his home, and saves him from sin. If only such a thing happened to us, we can think! But it does. We must realise this. We are called by name, by Jesus, at baptism. We take Him 'home', in Communion.

Luke tells us many encouraging stories: The prodigal son; The cunning steward; Lazarus and the rich man; The woman anointing his feet, and forgiven so much. Luke's gospel, like all the others, dwells in great detail on the Crucifixion of Jesus. Luke mentions episodes not given us by the others. Simon of Cyrene having to help Jesus carry His cross; and Women wailing over Him. The 'good thief' believing in Him. We find these very helpful, in taking part with Jesus in His sufferings in our prayers.

It is Luke who gives us the very strange story of the disciples going to Emmaus. They were so full of shock at seeing Jesus killed. They couldn't see Him, with them. They spoke in ways we can find very helpful, ourselves. We must accept then all the reproaches of Jesus. We learn, to strengthen our faith, with knowledge of the books. Jesus explains them, as giving us a sense of God's power, to rescue us from all our troubles – even death. He breaks the bread for them, and has to disappear; so that He can 'remain', for us; with the bread on His table, and words He speaks to us, at Mass.

Luke faithfully wrote all this down for us, to understand, and live by, in his Gospel.

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4 – The Gospel According to St John

THIS Gospel is thought to be the most sublime of the four, in that it emphasizes Christ's divinity more explicitly than the others. For that reason the author of this Gospel is nick-named, 'John the Divine.' And yet John balances Christ's divinity perfectly with his humanity. He raises our minds to the heights when he speaks of the eternal creative Word of God. In this Gospel alone Jesus applies the divine name, 'I am' = 'Yahweh,' to Himself. Then the evangelist brings us down to earth by saying, '***The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us***' and is shown to be physically tired and thirsty.

The Prologue to this Gospel introduces us to the conflict between Christ, the Light of Life, and the dark forces of evil. His victory is assured. Whether or not we share in it will depend upon our reaction to the light. Do we welcome it or do we prefer the death-dealing ways of darkness?

This conflict, which provides one of the central themes of the whole of this Gospel is embraced by two verses: At the beginning we are told, '***He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.***' Then the Gospel concludes, '***These things have been written so that you may believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and believing may have life in His name.***'

The above two verses reflect the different ways people respond to Jesus in every age. There's the sincere inquirer, like Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, but was not yet ready to commit himself. And then there's the sceptic, Nathaniel, early in the Gospel, and doubting Thomas at the end. They, as well as the semi-pagan Samaritan woman, represent the journey from doubt to belief in Christ.

We also have the crowds moving in the opposite direction – from wild enthusiasm to deserting Jesus. This variety of ways in which people reacted to Jesus is vividly expressed in chapter 6. There He tells us that we must eat His flesh and drink His blood. For the majority of the crowd this was a 'hard saying,' which they couldn't accept. As they deserted Him Jesus asked Peter whether he, too, would leave Him. To which the apostle replied, '***Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.***' Peter realized he would be lost without

Jesus. Finally, we see increasing opposition from the Jewish religious authorities.

The first twelve chapters of this Gospel are known as the ‘Book of Signs’ – a word John prefers to ‘miracles.’ The remaining chapters are called the ‘Book of Glory.’

In these chapters the language for our response to Christ becomes more intimate, moving from ‘belief’ to ‘love.’ He would draw them into the intimate life which He enjoyed with His heavenly Father. This is summed in the words ‘abide in,’ or ‘remain.’ At the beginning of the Gospel there is the invitation to ‘come and see.’

In His discourse before His Passion Jesus gave the assurance that He would remain with His followers always. He would not leave them orphans, but would send the Spirit of Truth to remind them of what He had said.

John sees Christ as being glorified in His Passion. Thrice it’s predicted in terms of His being ‘lifted up’ – not just physically from the ground to the cross, but ‘exalted’ there. This is a time of light, when He is in complete control of events and of His own emotions. In His Priestly Prayer He had consecrated His life and death to the glory of His heavenly Father. The moment of darkness came when Judas left to betray his master – not in the crucifixion itself. By washing Peter’s feet Jesus showed that His Passion was all about loving service of God and His people. That is our Christian vocation.

Moving to the resurrection, when the risen Lord greeted Magdalene by name in a familiar tone He forbade her to touch Him. Not that she was doing anything wrong, but now that He has risen all of us must learn to relate to Him in a new way, in which we can’t see, hear and touch Him.

Doubting Thomas epitomizes the journey of faith from scepticism to faith. He who had expressed his disbelief in the resurrection most emphatically came to make the most profound act of faith in Jesus, when he said, **‘My Lord and my God!’** The apostle should be called ‘Believing,’ not ‘Doubting Thomas!’ Jesus said to him, **‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’** That’s our situation.

Finally, the risen Lord sums up the mission of the Church when He tells Magdalene, **“But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’.”** And He says to Peter, **“Feed my lambs; feed my sheep.”**

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

5 – The Acts of the Apostles

THE Acts of the Apostles is really ‘St Luke Volume Two’. Though his name does not appear in either of the books, the tradition that Luke is the author of both the Third Gospel and the Acts is very ancient. And clearly the two books were written by the same person, as there is the same dedication to ‘Theophilus’ at the start of both.

As Luke’s Second Volume, Acts takes up the story where the Gospel left off: the Ascension of Jesus. In the Gospel, just before his Ascension, Jesus tells his followers they are to witness that he has brought repentance and forgiveness ‘to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’. The first chapter of Acts re-tells Jesus’ ascension and his commission to the disciples in more detail. ‘You will receive power’, he says to them, ‘when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’.

This gives the plan of the Acts of the Apostles. It tells how the Gospel spread out from Jerusalem as far as Rome, not quite ‘the ends of the earth’, but certainly the centre of the known world at the time. But this is not just a piece of ordinary human history. It is the story of God’s work in redeeming the world; and they will be able to take their part in it ‘when the Holy Spirit has come upon you’. So in Acts Chapter 2 Luke describes the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and immediately the lives of the disciples are changed, displaying a courage and wisdom they did not have before. Throughout the book he constantly shows how the Holy Spirit was guiding the spread of the faith. Just as the Spirit shaped and guided the Church in those early days, so it does so still.

In the first few chapters the action is all in Jerusalem. The disciples, and especially Peter, declare that Jesus, risen from the dead, is the expected Messiah. ‘Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified’ (Chapter 2.36). Just as the Jewish leaders had rejected Jesus, so now they rejected his Apostles. And just as crowds had gathered to listen to Jesus, so they listened to his Apostles, and were deeply impressed by their teaching and miracles. The infant Church grew up quickly and began organising itself with the appointment of Deacons (Chapter 6). But soon persecution began; and the first martyr, Stephen (one of the Deacons), was stoned to death (Chapter 7). Christian believers scattered from Jerusalem as a result of this persecution, and began preaching about Jesus in the neighbouring countryside and in Samaria. The Deacon Philip converted an Ethiopian court official and then went on to preach along the Palestinian coast, outside the strictly Jewish area. So Luke shows how the gospel spread geographically out from Jerusalem; but also how it spread among the Jewish people, then to non-Jewish people who were believers, and finally to the pagans, so that it became the saving faith for everyone.

Before this, though, in Chapter 9 as a kind of interlude, he describes the conversion of Paul, who had fiercely persecuted the Church, but who will become the central figure in the second half of the book. Then he picks up again the story of Peter (Chapter 9.32 to 11.18), who had a vision from God telling him not to regard anyone as profane or unclean. This led to his meeting a Roman centurion, Cornelius, non-Jewish though a devout Jewish believer. When Peter preached to him and his household, the Holy Spirit came on them just as it had on the Apostles. This convinced Peter that God's salvation through Jesus was not just for Jews but for everyone. No one is profane or unclean. But the more traditional believers in Jerusalem still needed persuading. Peter manages to do this (Chapter 11. 1-18), and the Gospel spreads quickly, especially along the coastlands, spearheaded by the preaching of Paul and Barnabas. King Herod attempts a counter-attack by murdering James, brother of John, and imprisoning Peter. But Peter is saved by divine intervention (Chapter 12), and then largely disappears from the scene, and Paul becomes the centre of the story for the rest of the book.

The story continues with Paul and Barnabas being commissioned by the Church at Antioch to go out on a preaching journey (Chapters 13 & 14), first to Cyprus and then into Asia Minor (Turkey). Wherever they go they preach first to the Jews in the local synagogue; but generally the Jews turn against them and persecution forces them on to new places, leaving behind a small group of converts, the nucleus of the Church there. The success of their preaching among the Gentiles raised the problem of whether Gentile converts were obliged to keep the Jewish law as converts from Judaism continued to do. Paul was quite certain that they did not; salvation comes, he said, through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and not through the keeping of the old law. But many Jewish Christians believed that all converts must be circumcised and keep the old law, just as Jesus himself had done. The conflict was intense, one of the most serious the Church has ever experienced; and it led to a meeting in Jerusalem (Chapter 15), at which both views were forcefully expressed and a solution thrashed out. The decision was that since Gentile converts will be saved 'through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as we will', they were not to be saddled with anything heavier than some ritual observances that would enable Jewish and Gentile Christians to live together amicably.

After this, Paul accompanied by Silas, set out on two other preaching journeys, revisiting the places in Asia Minor they had been to before and going on into Greece (Chapters 16-21). At one point in Chapter 16 the narrative suddenly begins to speak of 'we' rather than 'they', which indicates that Luke had joined them, though there is no indication of where he came from. The remainder of Acts (Chapters 21-28) is a gripping story of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, his trials there, his journey to Rome including their shipwreck on Malta, and his settling down in Rome under a gentle house-arrest, and trying to persuade the Jewish community to have faith in Jesus. It is an inconclusive finish, as though there is more to tell – as indeed there is, for the story of the Church continues, and we are part of it.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

6 – St Paul’s Letter to the Romans

THE first of the New Testament epistles is St Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*. It wasn’t his first letter but it’s put first partly because it was written to the Church of Rome and partly because of its great importance. Its subject is nothing less than God’s rescue plan for the human race. St Paul tells how God has guided history from the beginning and will guide it to the end, all so that human beings may be saved by His incarnate Son, through the grace that Christ brings.

St Paul was always keen to avoid any split in the infant Church between former Gentiles and former Jews. So he begins by some powerful words that deprive each group of any reason for boasting (chapters 1&2). Before their conversion, the Gentiles had sought to know the truth, as it were to ‘save themselves’, by philosophy (including what today people call ‘science’). But so far from succeeding, they had involved themselves in all manner of errors, especially moral errors. The Jews, on the other hand, had had the law of Moses. A great gift: yet, he tells them, they had not managed to keep it. Clearly, both Jew and Gentile needed something more.

That ‘something’, of course, is Christ, to whom we are united not by human reasoning, nor even in the first place by outward actions, but by *faith* (ch. 3). The proof of this is that even for Abraham, the heroic patriarch of the Jews, friendship with God (‘*justification*’) was based on faith (ch. 4).

Having thus made it clear that Jews and Gentiles alike are saved only by their faith in our Lord, who died and rose again, St Paul goes back to the beginning of history (ch. 5). *Why* is it, after all, that everyone needs a Saviour? It is because of the Fall of Man. When Adam sinned, death came into the world. From him, Jew and Gentile alike contracted original sin. Our Lord reverses this process. Just as all who are born of the flesh from Adam share in Adam’s fall, all who are re-born through Christ share His holiness and life.

Next, St Paul stops to avert misunderstandings. If God brings such good from evil, this doesn’t mean that we should be casual about sin! To live united to Christ means putting sin behind us (ch. 6). Again, the Old Law wasn’t a mistake, though it couldn’t save

anyone; it taught the Jews what an evil thing sin is, and made them long for deliverance (ch. 7). But we have something far better than the Old Law: the gift of the Holy Spirit. He dwells in us, saving us from our fallen state ('the flesh'), enabling us to fulfil God's commandments, and giving us a good hope of glory to come (ch.8).

Now he answers an objection. If God's rescue plan is meant for the whole race, how is it that so many of the Jews have not embraced it, while the Gentiles have? He answers, 'with great sadness and continual sorrow', that this turn of affairs was foreshadowed in the Old Testament itself: with both Abraham and Isaac, the younger child inherited rather than the elder. Who inherits eternal life and who does not depends ultimately on the wise providence of almighty God; yet not in such a way that any injustice is done to men (ch. 9). Those Jews who do not convert have put an obstacle in front of God's mercy: they want to become holy by their own efforts, when Christ can only share His holiness with them as a gift. This gift is made possible when one accepts the preaching of the Church (ch. 10). Yet no one should think that God has given up on His former people. The continuing conversion of some of them is proof of that. While God is currently using the failure of the old people to create a new one, a time will come when 'all Israel will be saved' (ch. 11).

St Paul then sketches the life of grace. First, how it should animate the whole Church, in which each member has his proper part (ch. 12). Then, how the Christian must fulfil his responsibilities in civil society. He reminds the Romans that civil authority also is from God, three times calling the civil ruler 'the minister of God' (ch. 13). This is the more remarkable when one reflects that the emperor at the time was Nero, notorious for his whimsical cruelty. Realist that he is, the apostle then notes that some of the faithful are finding it hard to relinquish all the practices of Judaism, especially the food laws. He is tender to their weak consciences, urging the other faithful to show a like tenderness, though not to waver on the point of doctrine, that Christ has declared all foods clean (ch. 14). We must bear with and 'build up' our brethren, whatever their background, as God bore with both Jews and Gentiles, that He might build them into His Church (ch. 15). St Paul expresses his desire to come to the Church in Rome, sends greetings to those whom he knows there, and bids the faithful avoid those who introduce new doctrines (ch.16). A paean of praise to the mysterious wisdom of God ends the epistle.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

7 – The First Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians

THIS letter was written by St Paul while he was at Ephesus (16.8), most likely in the spring of AD 56. Corinth was a flourishing commercial centre located between two seaports, linking the trade centres of the east with those to the west. The book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us that St Paul founded the church at Corinth about AD 51, yet he stayed only long enough to get things up and running (cf. Acts 18.1-18). The social make up of this young church seems very diverse: some were wealthy (11.22), others poor (1.26), and others were slaves (7.21). They were composed of both Gentile (8.7; 12.2) and Jewish Christians (7.18-20).

Nearly five years after their founding, the church at Corinth was riven by discord and some had fallen into vices which fractured the unity of the church, and which was dragging some away from the Faith. Although St Paul planned to visit Corinth in person (11.34) to set things straight again, his immediate response to the distressing news was to send the letter we commonly call ‘First Corinthians’, most likely through Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (16.17).

St Paul had first received the disturbing news of the trouble brewing in Corinth from the delegates of a woman named Chloe (1.11, 11.18). They reported news of internal divisions (1.12-15), a case of incest (5.1-5), sexual immorality (6.12-20), lawsuits between Christians (6.1-8), and explicit denials of the Resurrection (15.12). The Corinthians had become careless and even sacrilegious in their celebration of the Mass (11.17-34), and some had taken to exercising the charismatic gifts in a way which was disrupting the church rather than building it up (14.1-40).

First Corinthians gives a clear picture of the range of pressures exerted on the earliest Christians, both from within the church and from the surrounding pagan culture without. The problems faced by the Corinthians are the same which plague the Church in every age.

The letter begins with a powerful affirmation of the Cross of Christ as a paradoxical revelation of God’s wisdom and power (1.17-25). And it ends with an extended exposition of the Resurrection of the dead and God’s ultimate triumph over evil (15.1-58). The letter reveals St Paul’s understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and how that Gospel is to

be lived in daily life. When he says, ‘Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast’ (5.7-8), he means that because of Christ’s Sacrifice upon the Cross we must ‘keep the feast’, which includes renouncing those things that threaten the peace, communion and orthodoxy of the Church – among them sexual licence (6.12-20), liturgical carelessness and sacrilege (11.17-34).

To counter the factions threatening the Corinthian church, St Paul reflects on the meaning of the Cross. The Cross demonstrates God’s power and wisdom, which paradoxically appear as folly and weakness (1.17-2.16). Wisdom based on anything else is false. Using himself as an example, in imitation of Christ he does not seek his own glory but is content to seem foolish and weak (3.1-4.13).

In their pride the Corinthians had fallen to base sins. One man was sleeping with his step-mother, and others had interpreted St Paul’s proclamation of freedom in Christ as a licence to use prostitutes (5.1-6.20). St Paul addresses these problems, excommunicating the first man, and discussing marriage, divorce and the role of sex within marriage. In emphasising the Church as Christ’s body whose members we are, St Paul also addresses whether Christians ought to appeal to secular courts to settle disputes (6.1-11).

As for living in a non-Christian world, St Paul affirms that eating meat offered to idols is harmless (8.10). But he advises that Christians behave in such a way as to ‘build up’ the Church, and not to cause needless offence within the Church. Within the Church itself, he lays down guidelines for worship: the dress of women who prophesy (11.2-16), the manner of celebrating the Eucharist (11.17-34), and the exercise of charismatic gifts (12.11-40). Here again all things should serve to ‘build up’ and not divide or weaken. Rising to poetic heights St Paul launches into his famous paean on charity, the divine love (13.1-13) – over-laboured at weddings and funerals, but true nonetheless.

Then he concludes with clarification and exposition of the Resurrection, which the Corinthians were confused about. St Paul explains that Christ’s Resurrection is the cause and implication of the resurrection of all the dead, at His second coming, when He will complete His victory over evil and death. Then when all things are subject to Christ, He will subject Himself to the Father, so that God may be ‘all in all’ (15.28). Our Resurrection involves our present bodies, which will be transformed into ‘spiritual bodies’ (15.44).

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

8 – The Second Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians

THE Second Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians is a fascinating book. More than any other of Paul's letters, it gives us insight into Paul himself. It tells us a lot about the relationship of the apostles to the local churches, and about the church at Corinth itself and its relationship with the church in Jerusalem, and all of this helps us to understand what should be our own relationship to the Church, to its leaders, and to those Christians in other parts of the world who are poorer than we are.

The letter is part of a much longer relationship of Paul with Corinth, which we can only guess at from the things said in the two letters which are part of Scripture. Paul visited Corinth in the mid 50s AD, and then it seems he wrote a letter, warning them about various threats to their spiritual life (referred to in 1 Cor 5:9), and then the letter we have as 1 Corinthians. As promised (1 Cor 16:6), he visited them again, a visit he describes later as "painful" (2 Cor 2:1), and then wrote a letter he describes as "the letter of tears" (2 Cor 2:3-4). Then he wrote the letter we call 2 Corinthians, promising to visit a third time (2 Cor 12:14), and presumably visited, though we don't know for sure.

It seems that his relationship with the church at Corinth was somewhat difficult. St Paul is at pains to express his love for the Corinthians, but he spends a large part of 2 Corinthians defending his own authority as an apostle and his actions in reproaching the Corinthians for the ways they behaved and the way some of them treat him.

He reassures them that when he visits again, it will not be to painfully rebuke them and that what he has to say is not intended to cause pain, but to show them his love for them, and to encourage them in their spiritual lives, and especially in the practical support of those who are weak and suffering. Indeed,

the letter seems mainly intended to explain what needs to be done to support the poor in Jerusalem.

Paul talks about the importance of repentance and forgiveness. There is someone who has been stirring up trouble in the Corinthian community, and Paul talks about how important it is for the community to forgive this person so that “he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2 Cor 2:7). About the “letter of tears” Paul also says that he doesn’t regret writing it, not because he wanted to hurt the Corinthians, but because it brought them to their senses and made them repent.

The apostle exhorts the people of Corinth to be generous in their giving: “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.” And he talks about all the riches that will return to those who share what they have with others.

He defends his own authority as genuine and founded on God’s grace. He expresses his willingness to suffer and exert himself for the Gospel, and out of love for the Corinthians and other Christians to whom he goes. It seems some people found Paul personally unimpressive, and Paul defends himself principally by refusing to boast in personal strength, but in God, and in the obvious and genuine love he has for the Corinthians.

The letter shows Paul by turns admitting his human weakness, showing spiritual strength, deep tenderness of affection, wounded feeling, sternness, irony, rebuke, impassioned self-vindication, humility, a just self-respect and zeal for the welfare of the weak and suffering, as well as for the progress of the church of Christ and for the spiritual advancement of its members. All of this gives us a wonderful chance to see the qualities of a very great saint.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

9 – St Paul’s Letter to the Galatians

T might interest us that the ‘Gal-atians’ were Gaels, related to the Irish among us, living then in Asia Minor, now modern Turkey. Paul had converted many of them on previous missionary journeys, and was writing this letter, worried about things he had heard about them.

What he was writing to them might startle us. Delia Smith began a book on prayer with the astonishing remark: ‘Prayer is what God does’. She has learned what Paul is saying here. It is, that God has done it all for us. Jesus has saved us, for the Father, in a climax of love, obedience, and forgiveness, on the cross.

This was understood, as a perfect ‘sacrifice’. ‘Sacrifices’ were gestures to God. When we killed the animals and plants we had to eat, we had to invite God to share them with us; they were His. So we ‘sacrificed’ some of it — poured out its life-blood; or burnt it; or ate it solemnly ourselves, in His Presence. Jesus made a sacrifice — of Himself, letting Himself be killed on the cross. God sacrificed Himself, for us, in this perfect way.

We are called, simply to celebrate this, at Mass, eating and drinking. We are called, even to pray. We can’t pray, ourselves, as Jesus can. That is why all the Church’s prayers are said ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord’. That’s what Delia saw. That’s what we have to see.

Paul even quarrelled with Pope Peter, who was still tempted to rely on human gestures, for safety with God — the old Jewish ‘Law’; and seemed to have lost ‘faith’ — the real sense of wonder at all that Jesus has done. Paul is so angry and upset he allows himself the only ‘sex joke’ in the Bible. He says he wishes that the circumcision knife would slip! He is afraid the Galatians are doing the same thing, with ‘observances’.

All our Seasons, Calendars, Rubrics, Obligations, Vows, Canon Law, Morals? Aren’t they ‘observances’? We mustn’t see them so. They are our ways of living with God. We are caught up, called to live with

God, in His rich Life. Protestants misunderstood this, and so we had the Reformation churches.

A much bigger problem arises. There does seem nothing else to do, if we are saved, and even prayed for. Freedom, a sense of being safe, in ‘faith’ alone, can easily lead to licence. ‘Sin abounds’ as Jesus said it would. Many people, avoiding what they think any ‘observances’, live in thoughtless, loveless selfishness, to end up in hell.

St Paul invokes the Spirit as the guide for us. If we have understood the ‘Good News’ message, the obedience, love and forgiveness, shown us in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, it will ‘show’, in us. Jesus’ own ‘Spirit’ will live in us; especially as we are ‘confirmed’ in it. He lists the ‘fruits’, of the Spirit; the ‘results’, of life, with God: ‘Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, self control’. There is no law about these. It’s the way our hearts will beat, in the Spirit. Our religion will be done quite differently.

He ends describing how it should be done, almost in very practical politics. ‘You should carry each other’s troubles, and fulfil the ‘Law’ of Christ. ‘It’s the people who are not important who often make the mistake of thinking that they are. ‘Let each of you examine his own conduct; if you find anything to boast about, it will at least be something of your own, not just something better than your neighbour has. Everyone has his own burden to carry.’

He seems to be contradicting himself — ‘carry each other’s troubles’, to start with, and ending with the opposite, ‘everyone has his own burden to carry’. He is outlining the range of possibilities there is, and has to be, in Politics. There are no clear, obvious answers. We must think, with the Spirit in us.

Paul claims the right to say all this, by the marks (‘stigmata’), on his body, of the persecutions he has suffered, for the truth; marks, like ‘those of Jesus’. These would be the ‘ordinary’(!) marks of the beatings, and being stoned, he suffered, not mystical ‘marks of the nails’, as is often imagined.

Our sufferings, too, even if they leave no marks, are ‘those of Jesus’. He will recognise them, and reward us, in love. This wonderful Letter to the Galatians — and us — shows us so much.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

10 – St Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians

PAUL begins this letter by thanking the Ephesians for their faithfulness. Then in a magnificent hymn he thanks and praises God for what He has achieved through His Son, Jesus Christ. From before the foundation of the world He has planned that we should be a holy people. In Jesus this plan has been fulfilled.

The rest of this letter works out the implications of God’s eternal plan to save us all through Jesus Christ. He has created a new, single humanity in which Gentiles, “*are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God*

” (2. 19-22).

In Chapters 4-6, Paul explains God’s plan for us to live a holy life. This develops within the context of the Church so that we may grow together into the full maturity of Christ. He is the head of a single body, having different parts with a variety of functions. We need each other. We are united in one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Our unity in Christ determines how we should relate to each other. Paul uses the relationship between bride and groom to explain the loving commitment between Christ and His Church, which itself provides a profound insight into the dignity of marriage. We’ve already been told that we are fellow citizens in the household of God and that we have different functions to play for the good of the whole. The interplay of unity amidst diversity reaches its climax in the list of seven (the Biblical ‘perfect’ number) of

unities: “*one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all*” (4:4-6).

Although Ephesians has an exalted vision of the Church, it is also realistic. There’s a lengthy section on the need to avoid common sins. Some of these express the values of the Ten Commandments and the teaching of Jesus; others are good common sense. The implication is that the community needs to be reminded of such values and put them into practice. Doubtless, community members failed periodically in their endeavour to live like saints. They were, after all, human beings. The struggle between good and evil continues even in the Church. As the body of Christ, it is also composed of human beings who come equipped with both the highest and lowest of aspirations. Ephesians invites all the members of the Church to embody the good values while holding in check our basest desires.

Near the end of this letter, Ephesians uses a military image to invite the community to live up to the high calling of being Church. We are to be equipped spiritually to do battle with evil (6:10-17). Just as soldiers go off to war armed with the weapons that will help defeat their enemies, so the “holy ones” of the Church are exhorted to “put on the armour of God” (6:11, 13): the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s Word. Armed with such power, Ephesians expresses confidence that evil does not stand a chance.

At one and the same time, then, Ephesians lifts our vision to the heavens but keeps our feet firmly planted on the earth. Yes, we are the holy ones, the elect of God, called to bring all to God’s reign. But we must remain, as “Church,” ever vigilant in our attempts to live out this exalted calling.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

11 – St Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians

ST Paul wrote this letter to the church of Colossa, or Colossae, in the country now called Turkey, but in his day ‘Asia Minor’. He wasn’t the founder of that church: but as ‘apostle to the gentiles’, and Christ’s ambassador for almost 30 years, he is sharing with them the fruits of his experience and contemplation. It is, moreover, a ‘Letter from a Roman Jail’. St Paul was under house-arrest when he wrote, and at least some of the time, literally chained up. That must have made his powerful words strike the Colossians with all the more force.

The great theme of the letter is that we are united to God only through Christ and the Church. In St Paul’s time, as in ours, there were other ‘ways of salvation’ on offer: long-established religions, various schools of philosophy, and what we might rather vaguely call ‘New Age’ ideas. St Paul is solicitous that none of these should cause the faithful to leave the Way for a dead-end, or tempt them to mix dust in with the pure wheat of Christ.

He begins by reminding them of the Incarnation (chapter 1). Jesus Christ, the Man who lived in Palestine within their own life-time, is the eternal Son of God (vv.13,15). All things were made through Him; the very angels are subject to Him (v. 16). Yet Christ’s human nature is real too; in His human body He offered a sacrifice on the Cross by which the Father’s purposes are being fulfilled, both on earth and in heaven (v.20). Christ’s body also exists now in a mystical way: it is His Church, which ‘continues the Incarnation’ here-below. St Paul can thus speak of himself, and by implication, all the faithful, as ‘filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ’ (v.24). Our Lord’s own merits, of course, were infinite; yet the apostle sees Christ and the Church as forming ‘one mystical person’, whose sacred sufferings must continue till the moment that the Father has chosen. When that moment arrives, the whole Church will be suffused with Christ’s glory (vv.27-8). So great is this mystery that St Paul prays repeatedly that the faithful in Colossa will grow in wisdom, and in understanding of God’s will (*passim*).

After this, he warns them of various dangers (ch. 2). They must be on their guard against false philosophy, based on ‘the elements of

this world' (v.8). According to St Thomas Aquinas, this refers to any philosophy, or science, that tries to explain reality by reference only to matter. A modern example would be 'explaining' human intelligence by biological evolution, forgetting the spiritual soul created by God. Next, they should resist any temptation to add the old Jewish observances onto the Gospel, for example keeping feasts at the new moon or treating certain foods as unclean (v.16). That would be like honouring a person's shadow more than the person himself! For the law foreshadowed Christ (v.17). Again, they must avoid strange religious practices: for example, some people abased themselves before 'angels', all the time swelling with a secret pride at their superior knowledge of the spirit world (v.18). Whoever follows any of these false paths doesn't share in the victory that Christ won over the unclean spirits by His cross (vv.14-15), and which He shares with us by baptism (vv.12-13) into His Church (vv.19).

Having exhorted the Colossians to remain true to the faith, he now bids them live in a way worthy of it (chapter 3-4). The most important part of their life is hidden from view (v.3); it is their relationship with their risen Lord. They should love to think of heaven, where He is, (vv.1-2). If they do this, and to help them do this, they will cut out of their lives whatever could drag their hearts and minds away from heaven. St Paul lists various mortal sins, reminding the Colossians that they had once been entangled with such things (vv.5-9). Each of the faithful must gradually be made a living image of Christ (v.10), learning all the virtues (vv.12-15), deriving a spiritual joy from the inspired words of Scripture and the liturgy (v.16). In heaven, there are no social distinctions (v.11), but meanwhile, each one must do the duties of his state (v.17). Wives should not go against the will of their husbands; husbands must love their wives (vv.18-9). Children must obey their parents, and fathers discipline their children without anger (vv.19-20). The unfortunate institution of slavery must be justly managed: those in servitude can take heart from the fact that they are now serving Christ as their Lord (vv.22-5); those with slaves must remember that they will give account to God for how they treat them (chapter 4:1). Everyone should pray for the preachers of the gospel, that the faith may spread (v.2-4), and all the faithful should be evangelists, by acting and speaking sensibly towards those outside the Church (vv.5-6). He greets them in the name of various companions (vv.9-15), and, touchingly, bids them to be 'mindful of the fetters' he wears (v.18).

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

12 – St Paul’s Letter to the Philippians

If you were to pick out one word that characterises the letter to the Philippians, it would be: ‘Rejoice!’. St Paul uses it no less than ten times in four short chapters. And it expresses the tone and spirit of the letter. The town of Philippi is in the north-east corner of Greece, and it was the first stopping place for Paul and Silas when they crossed over from Asia Minor after Paul’s vision in a dream. You can read about that in Acts, chapter 16. They found a small Jewish community in Philippi, too small to have its own synagogue, so they met on the Sabbath outside the city by the river. Paul and Silas made contact with them there, and soon a Christian community was established, the first one in Europe. Even though Paul and Silas had to move on because of trouble (read about it in the same chapter) he always maintained a warm relationship with the Philippian Church, and his letter has none of the anxiety and distress of his letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians.

Evidently Paul was in prison, or at least in detention, when he wrote to the Philippians. It was probably during his prolonged stay in Ephesus. He speaks of ‘the imperial guard’, presumably his jailers, and of the way it had become public knowledge that his imprisonment ‘is for Christ’, i.e. that he is in detention because of his beliefs, not because of a crime (1:12-14). In fact, he says, his imprisonment has made the gospel more widely known, and encouraged the local church to preach more boldly (1:12-18). But he is full of hope that he will soon be released, to continue proclaiming the gospel ‘with all boldness’, whether by life or death. For, as he says, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But though he would ‘prefer to depart and be with Christ’, he is sure he will remain because that is necessary for the Philippians (1:21-26). He urges them to live in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that he can be sure that they are standing firm, and that they not only believe in Christ but also suffer for him, as Paul himself does.

This leads him to quote an early Christian hymn about Christ, a poetic expression of the incarnation, suffering and death of Christ, and his subsequent resurrection and glorification to the right hand of God. ‘Let the same mind be in you’, he says, ‘that was in Christ Jesus’ (2:5-11). We are to model ourselves on Christ who did not cling to his glory but humbled himself to share our life, even to death on the cross. Therefore God has exalted him to share the name that is above every name. So everyone should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. In this faith, says Paul, (paradoxically but truly), we should work out our salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in us. The words of this old Christian hymn will bear constant repetition until we know them all by heart.

After this Paul goes on to some practical arrangements (2:19 - 3:1), which end, characteristically: ‘Finally, brothers, rejoice in the Lord!’. Then the note abruptly changes, and we have a paragraph of warning (3:1-4). The abruptness of this change, among other things, inclines some Bible scholars to think the letter to the Philippians is really not one letter but two or three, written at different times and situations, but later joined together. This may possibly be the case, but it is not necessary to go into this to appreciate what Paul is saying. The warning he gives is against those Christians converted from Judaism who declared that circumcision and the keeping of at least some of the Jewish law was necessary for salvation. Paul is content to rebut this simply by saying that we Christians are ‘the true circumcision’, we are what the old circumcision was aiming at. We worship God in the Spirit and boast in Christ Jesus; we do not put any trust in outward ceremonies.

So, says Paul, if anyone has the right to rely on the Jewish rites and ceremonies, I certainly have. ‘I was circumcised on the eighth day, I am a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless’ (3: 4-6). But – and it is a big ‘but’ – I have come to regard all that as just so much rubbish in comparison with Christ. ‘For his sake I have suffered the loss of all those things, and regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead’ (3: 8-11).

Here Paul compresses into a few words what he has agonised over at much greater length in the Letters to the Romans and the Galatians. This faith and vision is what he lives by. He does not think that he has yet reached the goal, ‘but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own ... So forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’ (3: 12-14). And he urges the Philippians to imitate him, lamenting the fact that many people are ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’ (3:18).

In the final chapter he urges the Philippians to stand firm in the Lord, to be united, to seek whatever is true, honourable, just and pure, and to rejoice in the Lord always. He thanks them for the gift of money they have sent him, assuring them that he is always content, whether in wealth or poverty. It seems as if he does not want to end the letter, for several times he seems to conclude and then has a new thought. But one of these ‘false’ endings is as good a conclusion as you could want: ‘The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus’ (4:7).

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

13 – St Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians

PAUL made three missionary journeys. In the second and the third he visited a number of places including Thessalonica. After the second journey, about 51/51 AD, he wrote these two letters to the Thessalonians. They are the earliest of all Paul’s writings that we have got. They are fairly similar to each other. They are the earliest writings that we have for all the New Testament, including the Gospels. Other writings, especially Acts, give us clues as to where Paul was at various times.

Both letters are from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. Paul uses “Paul” for Greek contexts and “Saul” for Jewish contexts. Timothy will soon after these letters be sent to visit the Thessalonians. He came back with a good report.

Parts of the letters are encouraging, or reproving, but the Thessalonians seem to have been a good lot. They have been evangelists in Macedonia and Achaia. Paul was responding to particular circumstances and events, not making a theological tract. He was making his preaching of the Good News as plain as possible. His main concern in these two letters is with the Second Coming of Christ. His ideas develop.

In 1 Thessalonians the expectation of the Second Coming is to alert the Christian life of the faithful to matters of their ending. It was taken for granted that it would be in the lifetime of all the converts. It was then noticed that some were dying before the Second Coming. Paul’s solution is that Christ will bring the dead with him at the Second Coming. Paul will, later, have to cope with his own death before the Second Coming. Paul’s second expectation is that all the pagans will have been converted by then. Paul cannot have envisaged the sheer number of the pagans left to convert.

In 2 Thessalonians Paul sees dreadful signs on Earth before the Second Coming. They are gross evil signs that will be destroyed by the Second Coming. It is unsure what the signs refer to.

CAUTION: The Second Coming of Christ connects with other references in the Bible. Some connect with the Old Testament Day of the Lord. Some connect with the corrective aspects of the Second Coming. Some connect with liturgy and sacraments.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

14 – St Paul's Letters to Timothy

These two letters, together with the one to Titus, are commonly known as the 'Pastoral Letters.' They are addressed to individuals rather than to the communities of local Churches. Their purpose was to give guidance and encouragement to the recipients in their pastoral leadership.

The Pastoral Letters date from the last period of Paul's life, after he'd left his faithful disciple and companion, Timothy, behind to take his place at Ephesus. Timothy was a native of Lystra in Asia Minor, and was the son of a Greek father and Jewish mother. He accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys, and is associated with him in the greetings of a number of the Apostle's Epistles. Timothy was also Paul's emissary to the fractious Church in Corinth. He comes across as Paul's trusted co-worker and companion. In the lonely solitude of prison Paul longs for the company of his disciple, assistant and friend.

It is thought that the Christian community was more structured and stable when Paul wrote to Timothy, bishop of Ephesus, than when he wrote his early letters. Their purpose seems to have been to consolidate communities which Paul had already established. To this end they must set up overseers, elders and deacons. Their first responsibility was to teach sound, practical doctrine. This was to assist their flock in their life of prayer, in their family lives and in their good works. This doctrine was to be firmly based on the Old Testament and on Christ's teaching, which had been handed down by the apostles and Paul himself. Paul lays great emphasis on fidelity in handing on this tradition.

In fact sound doctrine is to be recognised by fidelity to its apostolic origins and to the piety it engenders. Paul has little time for what he considers to be sterile discussions about the Law and fanciful doctrinal speculation. In the Church of Timothy's day, various charismatic gifts and the tensions they caused in the earlier letters to the Corinthians have now given way to orderliness and organisation. There's no longer the expectation of Christ's imminent return in glory. Now the Church has settled down for the long haul. So, prayers are to be offered for kings and administrators. In extolling the dignity of motherhood Paul reacts against those who denigrate marriage (1 Tim. 2. 8-15).

Timothy is warned that the most pressing danger comes from within – from Christians who do not respect the sound teaching that has been handed down to them. Instead, they propagate false views. They are accused of being self-appointed and self-opinionated. Believed to be pious they easily win followers, especially among women (2 Tim. 1. 4). They are preoccupied with empty discussions, fables and genealogies. So Timothy is urged to remain in Ephesus to combat this false teaching. Reference to the Gospel entrusted to him inspires Paul to thank the merciful God for calling him, the persecutor of

Christ's followers, to His service. He, Paul, was living witness that Christ came to save sinners.

Since the hierarchy of overseers (bishops), presbyters and deacons is to be the bulwark against heresy Paul lays great emphasis on the qualities these officials require. Timothy should not feel inadequate because of his youthfulness, but should trust in the Spirit he has received through the imposition of hands. (1 Tim 3. 2)

The 2nd Letter: This was written when Paul was imprisoned in Rome. Realizing that he could do little to protect the churches he had founded and that his death was imminent he urged Timothy, his faithful disciple to fan the flame of grace which he has received through the imposition of hands. Here Paul gives gives Timothy his final instructions.

He must not be timid or become discouraged in bearing witness to Christ. This means he must be prepared to suffer persecution. While being tough in enduring suffering he must be gentle in dealing with everyone (2. 24).

Paul entrusts Timothy with the special obligation of choosing trustworthy people who would hand on the faith to future generations (2. 2). This makes two important points. Firstly, Paul now does not expect Christ's imminent return in glory, and secondly, the Church must be on constant guard against false teachings. Timothy's weapons were to be goodness, kindness and love (2. 24-5).

This 2nd letter to Timothy tells us that even though Paul was imprisoned he was content; he is proud to be suffering for preaching the Gospel; he can witness to Christ before the tribunals; he can continue to exercise his ministry through his disciples, Tychicus and Mark. This letter movingly reveals Paul's close friendship with his disciple, Timothy. He's remembered constantly in his prayers; Paul recalls the sadness of their parting. He affectionately recalls the names of his family. In his prison loneliness he misses Timothy's companionship and repeatedly urges him to visit him, before his execution makes that impossible. In a very human touch, Paul not only instructs Timothy to come with Mark, but also to bring his tunic and books.

In such a revealing letter Paul discloses his mood swings while in prison. On the one hand he is buoyed up by the support given by Onesiphorus, who frequently visited him; on the other hand, he complained that the Christians of Asia Minor had all left him in the lurch, after his first court appearance (4. 16). Nevertheless he was confident that God was standing by him.

This letter is a very moving conclusion to Paul's life. Through Timothy he has made provision for his mission to the Gentiles to continue. Now as Christ's great ambassador faces imminent death he can claim that with the grace of God he has fought the good fight and can now look forward to the crown of glory in the kingdom of heaven (ch. 4).

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

15 – St Paul’s Letters to Titus and Philemon

THE EPISTLE to TITUS really goes with 1 & 2 Timothy, which we looked at last week. But to deal with all three books at once would be asking too much. However, Titus is a very different kind of book from Philemon, so these two books will have to be considered separately, and we will take Titus first.

TITUS together with 1 & 2 Timothy are usually called the Pastoral Epistles, because they are more concerned with pastoral and practical issues than with expounding the Christian faith. Titus himself was a Gentile convert to Christianity, one of St Paul’s faithful disciples, who accompanied him to Jerusalem for the meeting to resolve the dispute about whether Gentile converts were obliged to keep the old Jewish law (see Acts 15). Later he negotiated on Paul’s behalf with the Corinthian church. Later still, as is clear from Titus 1:5, Paul and Titus preached in Crete, and when Paul moved on elsewhere he left Titus in charge. This is the only evidence we have of Paul preaching in Crete, so we do not know exactly when it happened. But the situation is reflected in the Epistle, which was written largely to encourage and guide Titus now that he was responsible for the Cretan church.

After a formal greeting, Paul tells Titus to ‘put in order what remains to be done, and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you’ (1:5). He then goes on to remind Titus of the qualities an ‘elder’ should have: that he should be blameless, not arrogant or quick-tempered, but a lover of goodness; prudent, self-controlled and devout. He must have a firm understanding of Christian doctrine, so that he can both teach it and refute those who contradict it. This leads him to reflect first on the false teaching that was going around at the time, and then to contrast it with authentic Christianity. In all this, he is concerned not so much with the doctrine believed and taught, as with the behaviour of believers. He quotes a 6th century BC Cretan poet, Epimonides, who said that Cretans were always ‘liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons’. In contrast, says Paul, the older men in the Christian community must be temperate, serious, sound in faith and love; the women must be reverent, self-controlled, good managers of their households and loving towards their husbands, the young are to be well-behaved, and slaves submissive to their masters. Unbelievers will then have no grounds for criticism.

This exhortation is given twice in much the same terms: 2:2-10, and 2:15 to 3:3. In each case it is grounded on God’s ‘appearing’ among us: 2:11-14, and 3:4-8. These verses give a brief summary of Paul’s theology of salvation: ‘he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit ... poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life’ (3:5-7). After this Paul ends the Epistle with a few business matters, and with closing blessings.

THE EPISTLE to PHILEMON is a completely different kind of letter. It is both the shortest and the most personal of all Paul's writings, and it is remarkable and fortunate that it has survived.

The letter was written because when Paul was in prison (Rome or Ephesus? we don't know) he met a run-away slave called Onesimus, and converted him to Christianity. The slave's legal owner was Philemon, who probably lived in Colossae in Asia Minor. It is clear from the letter that Philemon was a Christian, known to Paul, and presiding over a house-church ('the church in your house', verse 2). Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter; but he is obviously torn over what he should do. He has great affection for Onesimus and would like to keep him as a helper in his preaching. But he knows that legally a slave belongs to his master. As an apostle he could insist that Philemon gives Onesimus his freedom, but he prefers to let him do this freely, not under pressure (verse 14). So he writes gently and with humour. The name 'Onesimus' means 'useful', and he jokes that though formerly the slave had been useless, now he will be useful both to Philemon and to himself (verse 11). And he urges Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, now no longer as a mere slave, but as a beloved brother (verse 16). So, he says, welcome him as you would welcome me. And if he has wronged you in any way, I myself will repay the debt. He asks Philemon to get a room ready for him as he hopes to visit him before long (verse 22), and brings the letter to an end by sending greetings from all those who are with him.

Reading this letter raises two thoughts. First, there is no hint that Paul considers the institution of slavery wrong. He seems to have accepted it, as he accepts the authority of the Roman Emperor, as an unquestioned part of the social structure. More than that, though, he seems to consider the institution as largely irrelevant in comparison with the life in Christ which he and Onesimus and Philemon all share. In the Epistle to the Galatians he says: 'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (3:27-8). And what he expresses there as a general principle, he is seen living out in practice in the letter to Philemon.

Second, this letter reveals Paul's character in a very direct way. He comes across as a relaxed and loving person; so it forms a balance to the picture of him that we have from most of his other Epistles. So often when he was writing other letters he was under pressure, dealing with discord and disputes, or struggling to find the right words to express the truths and the demands of the Gospel. He was anxious for his converts, and sometimes angry with them. But in PHILEMON he is just himself, gentle, caring, an old man now, as he says (verse 9), and displaying some of the benignity of old age. It is unfortunate, though perhaps inevitable, that in the Mass readings we hear PHILEMON only once every three years on Sundays, and once every other year on weekdays. If we were to read this Epistle more often we would have a more rounded picture of St Paul.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

16 – Letter to the Hebrews

THERE has long been a discussion about the precise relation of St Paul to the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. Clement of Alexandria, who was born around 150, said that it is obvious from the style that St Luke has translated St Paul's words from a Hebrew original into our Greek version. Be that as it may, the Church has said that it should be regarded as one of the authentic letters of the Apostle Paul.

He is addressing the faithful in Palestine who had entered the Church from Judaism, and were now being pressured to give up their belief in Christ. Therefore, throughout the letter, he uses the Old Testament itself to urge them to persevere. He begins (chap. 1) by showing how much greater our Lord is than any angel. He thereby (chap. 2) contrasts the Old Testament, delivered by angels on Mount Sinai, with the New, brought by Christ in person. Though Jesus became 'a little lower than the angels' by His incarnation, this was simply that He might become our priest, and so lead us into glory.

Next, he contrasts Christ and Moses (chap. 3). Moses was a servant in God's household, but Christ is a Son, and, as God, the very founder of the house. When Moses led the Israelites through the desert to the promised land, this was a figure for our journey towards heaven. So we must be careful not to fall by the wayside, as so many of them did (chap. 4). To deny Christ is akin to crucifying him again (chap. 6), with no 'second baptism' to blot out the sin.

When St Paul wrote, the animals were still being sacrificed daily in the temple in Jerusalem. So, in order that the faithful shouldn't be tempted to return to that form of religion, he shows how it has been surpassed by Christ. He quotes an ancient prophecy (chap. 5), that God would raise up a new high priest, 'according to the order of Melchisedech'. Now, the priests in the temple are descended from Aaron and ultimately from Abraham (chap. 7); but since Abraham himself honoured Melchisedech, this new high priest must be greater than they. Christ is this new priest, and unlike the old ones, He is sinless and lives for ever and so is able to bring us to perfection. After all, Jesus ministers not in a man-made temple (chap. 8), but in heaven itself. As the Old Testament predicted, He has introduced a New Covenant in which the faithful can be intimately united to God.

St Paul now contrasts the sacrifices of the Old Law with the sacrifice of Christ (chap. 9). The shedding of animal blood could only confer an outer, ‘ritual’ purity, giving the Jews a right to observe their various feasts; Christ’s precious blood purifies the soul itself. Moses himself foretold this by his arrangement of the temple: the ‘Holy of Holies’ was shut off by a veil, to show that heaven was closed to man, but once a year the high priest entered it with blood. This foreshadowed how our Lord was to come to redeem us with a single sacrifice. The constant repetition of the old sacrifices (chap. 10) shows that, unlike Christ’s death, they have no power to redeem us (*NB St Paul doesn’t explicitly discuss how the holy Mass brings Christ’s redemption to us, as this would have complicated his argument uselessly; but he seems to allude to it in 9:23 and 13:10*).

To avoid being swayed by the imposing temple sacrifices (these would end in AD 70, when the Romans sacked the city), the faithful in Jerusalem must live by faith (chap. 11), without which no one can please God. St Paul encourages them by describing the lives of the ancient saints who held firm to God’s promises even though they were in a minority: for example Noah who built the ark, or Abraham setting off from his home for foreign climes. Like them, the faithful must long for the city of God, as strangers and pilgrims in this world.

Above all, they must keep their eyes fixed on Jesus (chap. 12). If He was willing to go through such a seemingly shameful death to reach heaven, why should His followers be disturbed by hostility? Their present sufferings result not from God’s displeasure, but from His fatherly discipline, by which He detaches His sons from this world and prepares them for the heavenly Jerusalem. The visible universe itself is going to fall apart, but the Kingdom of Christ will remain unshaken. The holiness of that kingdom is beyond imagination, but His sacrifice can bring us there, into fellowship with the very angels.

The apostle concludes (chap. 13) by exhorting the faithful to be hospitable to each other and to remember those who suffer for Christ. Those who are married must ‘keep the bed undefiled’; all should be loyal to the Church’s shepherds. Rather than seek for success in this world, they should trust in God to provide what they need, sustained by the food which only those who believe in Christ may eat. He humbly asks them to accept his words of consolation, asks for their prayers, and sends greetings from the Church in Italy.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

17 – The Letter of James

MARTIN Luther brought about the ‘Reformation’, five hundred years ago, resulting in the many Christian ‘churches’ we see today. It was partly due to a change in people’s habits. The growth of towns, and special crafts, gave people more leisure. The printers’ craft catered for them. It put books into people’s hands. They could read at home. They weren’t so dependent on a common source, like the Church, or Universities, for worship, and knowledge.

Luther had become overwhelmed with a vision of God’s love and forgiveness. He thought it had been forgotten, with the many ceremonies, and ‘good works’, in the old Church. These had to be repudiated by all real Christians. The Bible they had at home would be their guide, personal faith all they needed. It suited the new class of independent minded individuals very much.

The dangers in this were seen at once. Spokesman for the Church pointed out the strong message in this little letter of James that ‘faith, if good works don’t go with it, is dead’. Obvious, really, isn’t it? We all do think this now; but the damage has been done.

Luther’s reply was to call this ‘a straw epistle’! He had to pick and choose, among parts of the Bible, to get the meaning he himself really wanted all along. The dangers of protestant ‘private judgement’ became clear at once, at the very beginning of the Reformation. We have to accept every word of God, the whole truth. This is difficult. It is what needs to be done. The Church, with all its consideration and care, does it.

A Saint, Augustine, had put it so clearly a thousand years earlier. He said he didn’t believe in the Church, because he found it in the Bible. He believed in the Bible because he found it in the Church. James’ sensible little letter has many things to say. Like some sermons, it rambles.

Our misfortunes are ‘tests’ of us. They can be seen through. They

can be coped with. God doesn't tempt us. God helps us. Religion is a real love, for everyone, without all our social distinctions.

Then the message about good deeds. We must be clear about this, as much as we can. We live with Jesus in the Church. We must expect His grace to be with us. Grace is the goodness of God Himself. Its results, its 'fruits', will show in us, in our good deeds. 'Ours' – with God.

Then James has a strong message about our tongues. Our gossiping can do such harm. We need good examples. We can even provide a good example, ourselves. He is frank about the need for peace, and peacemakers. He urges prayer, for the right things, things that God will provide. He even wants us to be sad and wise, rather than glad and foolish. He uses the phrase that used to be heard often, and now hardly ever: 'Please God'.

We have no right to be so confident of ourselves, or the future. God's will is to be done, and justice and peace will prevail in the end. He tackles sickness, full on. It can make people despair of a good God. In fact it has to be dealt with. As a priest I still continue with his recommendation to anoint the sick with sacred oil, and give God's life, to those who so need it, then. I am carrying on Jesus' care and special love for them, here and now, today.

James makes point after point, with vivid examples, and illustrations. There is no exaltation, or rising to mystical heights, or even theological speculation about it. It's just a useful catalogue of sensible practice. Perhaps the Church was slow to catch up with what was happening to people at the time of the 'Reformation'. We learned lessons, and put them into practice, but years later, and for many 'too little, too late'.

Can we think what might be necessary today, with so many lost sheep to find? The answers might be, not what we may think, but in ways much more wonderful and surprising.

It will take Saints, again, to know, and show, God's will. Any volunteers?

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

18 – The First and Second Letters of Peter

A few times in the year, our bishop Malcolm writes to us a pastoral letter, dealing with some aspect of concern to Catholics or about church government. You may be interested to discover that this is nothing new. St Peter and other apostles wrote their own letters, discussing issues of concern to people and giving pastoral advice and encouragement.

The two letters of St Peter which we have in our bible are like modern pastorals in that they deal with a particular situation, are written to particular people and express particular concerns, but they are part of Scripture because the Church recognises them as inspired by the Holy Spirit, which means they are wholly true and enduringly valuable. We can find answers to our own difficulties by reading them.

The first letter of St Peter

Peter begins by telling us to whom the letter is addressed: he's writing to the Christians of Asia Minor, the area of the Roman Empire between the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Mediterranean.

His purpose in writing seems to have been to encourage them in a time of persecution. He comes back a great deal to the idea of the new life given to Christians in baptism, so it may be that the letter was intended for people who were relatively newly-baptised, fresh converts, who need encouraging to stand firm even though they must "bear all sorts of trials" (1:6). That of course makes the letter quite relevant to our own situation, where we can feel under pressure in a society that understands and tolerates Christianity less and less.

He gives lots of practical advice about how to cope with living among people who have a very different attitude to the moral life than Christians do. He counsels respect for civil authority and talks

about the good order and simplicity of life in a good marriage. He talks about the importance of behaving honourably amongst those who don't believe, and the ways in which his readers must be prepared to face ridicule and even suffering because they hold themselves apart from the immoral practices in which those who do not accept Christ take part.

A central part of his message is the beauty, and dignity of the Christian life, the wonderful work of God in paying a ransom to rescue us, "not paid in anything perishable like silver or gold but in the precious blood ... of Christ" (1:18-19). He shows us how important our call to holiness is, and how we should endure in hope.

The second letter of Peter

In his second letter, Peter seems mainly to be concerned with asking why things in this life seem so unfair, why the good suffer and the evil go unpunished.

He begins with a reminder of the goodness of God, all the gifts He gives us and the wonderful things God has done and is still doing to provide us with the things we need for life and faith. Peter reminds us that we need to persevere in faith and devotion, and in love for those around us.

He affirms that his teaching is based on what he himself saw, that the Gospel is not a set of cleverly-invented myths. He argues that Christian faith too is the confirmation of what was prophesied.

All this, because he wants to face down a great criticism of Christianity which arose early on and is still with us: people say there are no rewards for a good life, and no punishments for a bad one. He shows by looking at how God has acted in the past that this is just not so, that those who follow Christ will be rewarded, and those who live an evil life will finally be punished for it.

He ends with an exhortation to holiness, "Think of our Lord's patience as your opportunity to be saved" (3:15). Of course, those words are addressed to us too.

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

19 – John’s three Letters, and Jude’s

THE Gospels are full of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles are full of the apostles’ travels and trials. The epistles are full of theology, explaining the faith we have, in Jesus. These little letters are written in a world where Jesus isn’t to be seen. It’s our world. He is to be thought about, believed in, and followed. John writes to help us do this. It is so sad to see that troubles we have among Christians today, were there already in the church at the very start. There were teachers with dangerous, misleading ideas. The impression Jesus made was so powerful. It made for all sorts of imaginings. Was He human? Or an apparition? Many Christians don’t realise how human He is. Did He really die? A billion Muslims, today, think He didn’t. ‘Allah took him away.’ Did He say things only a few could understand? There are people who think so. There weren’t, then, the gospels and epistles in circulation, to make it all so clear. We have them now, and need them. We must read them, or listen to them, carefully. These little letters make for very helpful reading. The ‘key words’ are – love, light, truth, knowing, children, life with God.

It is all seen very intensely. ‘If you refuse to love, you must remain dead; to hate your brother is to be a murderer; and murderers, as you know, do not have eternal life.’ It is all seen very realistically. One of the most mysterious passages in the letter is ‘There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water and the blood, and all three agree’. The ‘blood and water’, was seen coming from His side on the cross. He really died. The ‘Spirit’, He gave to His Father on the cross. He showed us really how to love. John as an old man was asked to preach. He said ‘Little children, love each other’. They said to him, didn’t Jesus say more than that? John said. ‘Not really.’

Having said all this about our life alone with God, I now have to say something quite different about the second letter. It seems to have been written to a Church, as a lady. We used to think of Holy Mother Church, as a reality, a great Person looking after us. This

picture has been lost recently, with different images, such as the Mystical Body of Christ, the People of God, the Pilgrim Church; but here it is, in the Bible. It reminds us that in the spiritual world, the real world, we are like children. If you have ever dared to explore this world, you know how true that is. Then there is the remark: ‘If anyone comes to you bringing a different doctrine, you must not receive him in your house or even give him a greeting. To greet him would make you a partner in his wicked work’.

This has been used to justify centuries-old unfriendliness among the churches. We are all much more polite and friendly now. Are we being careless about doctrine? I think we have to see ourselves as missionaries. Missionaries learn the language of the people, and all their ways and concerns. We try to understand them, as the only way to make ourselves understood, by them .

It’s very difficult because people in other churches already know Jesus and have their own thoughts and ways of worship. We have to see where God lives, His real ‘house’. A joke among us is, that with the Greek word no-one can pronounce, that we use for this ‘house’-keeping, ‘ecumenism’, we mean ‘you-come-in-ism’; to us, as we are. It isn’t that. Many churches we see may have things to contribute to the one Church,

The third letter puts the finger on the problem. It is – personalities. A church leader ‘seems to enjoy being in charge of it.’ This is always a bad sign. We take our positions given to us humbly – our faith, marriage, parenthood, vocation. It is sad that so early in the Church’s life there was so much trouble. There was trouble around Jesus, hatred of Him, enough to have Him crucified.

There is a little letter, of a Jude, aka Thaddeus, we hear nothing about; a ‘lost’ apostle. He is sympathetically thought of as the patron saint of lost things. There is nothing lost about this very practical letter. Read it – it takes a minute. You have a Bible at home, haven’t you?

AROUND THE BIBLE IN 80 WEEKS

20 – The Apocalypse, or Book of Revelation

THE Apocalypse is the most difficult book of the New Testament. Other books are either narrative, telling a story, like the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles; or they are letters, personal communications to groups or individuals. The Apocalypse is not like either of these. It is written in the style we call ‘apocalyptic’, which was a development from the prophecies of the Old Testament. The OT prophets — Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the others — had proclaimed God’s will for His people in the different situations they found themselves in, calling them back to live according to His law but assuring them that God would bring them salvation and put the whole world to rights.

However, as the years went by this did not seem to be happening. The Jews were being continually oppressed by one pagan ruler after another, and were in danger of losing heart. The book of Daniel in the OT introduced a new way of expressing the faith that despite appearances God’s victory was assured. They began to write prophecies that purported to be the work of some great figure in the past, expressing in visions and symbols the victory of God in the future. This way of writing is called ‘apocalyptic’, from the Greek word which means ‘to reveal’ or ‘to unveil’. Because God had revealed his purposes to his chosen writers in the past, it was quite certain that His will would be done, and believers could face the apparently uncertain future with confidence.

So apocalypses were speaking about the experiences of those for whom they were written, saying that their sufferings now are a sign of the present victory of God, despite appearances to the contrary. They were not written to foretell the future, but to make sense of the present.

This is the kind of book that St John’s Apocalypse is. It was written in the second half of the 1st century AD, for the people of Asia Minor, who were suffering from persecution for their faith, as St John himself was. He says: ‘I, John your brother, who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus’ (chapter 1, verse 9). They were also being tempted by Gnosticism, a popular religious philosophy of the time, in which Jesus was seen as a semi-divine figure, and which offered an easier and seductive form of faith, simply by-passing the sufferings of the present without making sense of them.

St John’s Apocalypse takes the form of a series of visions which use imagery to describe the evils of the present time and give assurance that

God's victory is certain. So the central theme is: 'the world cannot see it, but God's victory is being won NOW'. The book opens with a majestic vision of the glorified Christ (chapter 1), followed by a 'covering letter' of encouragement and warning to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor around Ephesus where John had lived (chapters 2 and 3). The bulk of the book is in seven sections, each of which expresses in different images the central theme of God's conquest of evil, a victory experienced precisely in conflict, as on the cross. These themes are:

Chapters 4 and 5: the Lamb, sacrificed yet living, an image of Christ; **Chapters 6 and 7:** the Seven Seals, which have kept secret God's purposes but which are opened by the Lamb; **Chapters 8 to 11:** the Seven Trumpets, which announce God's judgement; **Chapters 12 to 14:** the Serpent, the personification of evil; **Chapters 15 to 16:** the Seven Bowls, which express the wrath God against sin; **Chapters 17 to 19 v.10:** Babylon, image of the city of mankind in rebellion against God; **Chapters 19 v.11 to 22 v.5:** the New Heaven and New Earth, a vision of the future which God has prepared for us.

The book ends with the remainder of Chapter 22, a series of guarantees and encouragements. Each of these sections is divided into either three or seven smaller sections, three and seven being sacred numbers.

When you read the Apocalypse, there are three points to remember. First, the book is not giving information about the distant future and setting out the time table for the end of the world. That is how it is often interpreted, but this mistakes the kind of literature it is. In any case, Jesus has said: 'It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority' (Acts 1: 7). The Apocalypse, like all books of this kind, is speaking in the first instance about the present in which both the writer and his readers lived.

Second, the message of the Apocalypse is that the victory of God is already experienced now, in the suffering of persecution and the apparent triumph of evil. That, after all, is the meaning of the cross, and it is a message for all ages. This victory will be openly displayed in the new heavens and the new earth.

Third, the book conveys its message by imagery, not by factual information. For example, Jesus is the Lamb, the one who was sacrificed; but he is standing, alive, and has therefore triumphed over death. The serpent is the tempter – echoes of the Garden of Eden. Babylon, the city that first destroyed Jerusalem, symbolises human evil and also the pagan city of Rome. And so on.

Don't be afraid of the Apocalypse! Read it and let its images seep into your mind and heart, to give faith and endurance.