

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow THE EPIPHANY or MANIFESTATION OF CHRIST TO THE GENTILES**

**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2010**

[or Second Sunday after Christmas]

January 6th is the 12th day of Christmas, the commemoration of the visit of the Wise Men to the newly-born Jesus, and the end of the Christmas Season. St. Matthew records that "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the Child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." (Matt.2:10,11) The Gospel Reading describes the visit and the worship of the Christ-Child by the first non-Jews, those wise men from the East.

The Jews had for centuries been looking for the coming of the Messiah, who would lift them up to heights of glory, and make them the Top Nation in the world, as it had been according to tradition in the days of the great King David. It is significant that Matthew, himself a Jew and writing originally for the benefit of Christian Jews, should choose to include this account of the Nativity of Jesus the incident which proclaims loudly and clearly that Jesus is the Man for all mankind., .

Folklore has taken over the actual wording of St. Matthew's record and turned the wise men into three kings, representing the three major ethnic groups: those with European fair skins, those with dark skins like the Negroid races, and those with yellow skins like Asiatics. The implication being that all mankind was represented as there worshipping. Sometimes these three kings are shown as being representative of people in various stages of life - one a youth, one middle aged, one elderly - suggesting that all mankind, regardless of age, was represented

The first thing St. Matthew is telling us, and which legend simply pads out, is that the Christ came not just to be the Saviour of His own people, but of all mankind, of all races and of all age groups. Then he tells us that the wise men were guided by a star to Christ. There are various theories about that star. For one thing, the position of the stars at certain times has always been understood by astrologers to indicate significant happenings, and the wise men were almost certainly astrologers. Astronomers have tried to identify that star: Halley's Comet was about the place in the year 12 BC. In 7BC the planet Jupiter crossed the paths of Venus and Saturn, so I'm led to believe. It is a bit hard to think of identifying one house in a village because of a star, even a very bright one - shining directly overhead. But something had made these wise men set off to find Christ.

I wonder what made you set off to find Christ, to begin your spiritual pilgrimage? Whatever it was, it was not in the usual way we meet people and become friends. It was not because we physically met Jesus and were attracted to Him. . More likely it was because of someone we admired who was a churchgoer. Or because we were drawn into church circles by our parents or friends. It might have been because we thought it was the right thing to do. But who gave us that idea? With each of us, something or someone acted as a star to draw our attention to Christ.

The church building itself ought to be a star to the neighbourhood. That's why churches used to be built on a hill, with a spire, to be plainly visible, catching the eye. That's why it is good when a church has a bell, rung before services, to catch the ear of the careless and the unheeding. Sometimes a church building isn't very attractive, neglected, and in need of repair or repainting. That suggests that the folk who worship there do not have a vision of their Church as a star, to attract people to the worship of God. For that reason, our buildings ought to be attractive and well-cared-for.

We church-people ought to be stars - men and women who by the brightness of our lives and dispositions may lead others to the ultimate source. It is not books or philosophies or music or even sermons that will lead people who are outside the Church into the direction of Christ. It is the person who is scrupulously honest in business dealings, who is cheerful in the face of adversity, who has time to listen and talk and even weep with someone in trouble; who can point others to the source of their own light. Not that it always works out that way, I'm afraid - our own light tends to be dimmer at some times than at others, so we ourselves must also be seeking to come nearer to Christ all the time.

When these wise men arrived in Christ's presence they presented gifts. The test of a person's sincerity is whether he will back his beliefs financially. That is a test which works in all situations in "Put your money where your mouth is"; "Put up or shut up" are sayings which illustrate the point. It underlines the reality that faith, for our giving represents part of ourselves. Usually it comes out of our earnings, what we have worked for, and we might have it on ourselves, on little luxuries which we undoubtedly deserve. Instead we choose to offer it to God, for the support, maintenance, and extension of His work. That is why the taking up of the collection in the service of worship is part of the worship. The sidesmen don't take it off you as an entrance fee, otherwise we would install turnstiles! Nor do they take it and put it in the safe as soon as they have taken up the collection. It is taken to the altar and dedicated, as part of our whole offering. The old prayer in the 1662 Order put it well: "We humbly beseech Thee most mercifully to accept our alms (our freely given gifts) and oblations (that is, the bread and wine)" The fact that these monetary gifts are used for such mundane purposes and paying the electricity or buying mop oil, or as part of the priest's stipend, is incidental. It is the *free offering* which counts, as far as the giver is concerned. The **use** to which it is put is a different aspect of stewardship - the proper use of gifts made for the Church to use in Christ's work.

The wise men when they arrived at Christ's cradle, worshipped first and then they opened their treasures. The treasures themselves were highly significant. Please don't go off thinking that the Church is only after your cash - what we offer in a representative way is the whole of life! The gold and the frankincense and the myrrh might be said to represent the whole of life - wealth, culture and suffering: all offered to Christ. And they are pretty ineffective unless they are so offered.

The world takes a lot of convincing that **gold** itself is not the miracle worker - wealth does not automatically produce happiness. It used to be thought that a higher rate of income would produce a higher standard of living and so reduce crime. Places with the highest standard of living have also a high crime and suicide rate. The truth is that riches alone are insufficient - riches without worship are dangerous.

What about **frankincense**? What about culture? Is our modern civilisation really producing contented happy people? Is modern science smoothing the way to a peaceful, well-adjusted world? Or adding to our fears of the future? Science and culture, like wealth, must be dedicated to God before they will really benefit mankind.

And thirdly the wise men presented *myrrh*, traditionally representing grief and suffering. We tend to take for granted, unthinkingly, that trouble is an automatic educator. "Experience is the best teacher", we say. Not so, I'm afraid. We are very slow to learn from past errors, and when we do, it is probably because we have taken our calamities to Christ and learned a better way from Him.

So the Epiphany is to remind us and to urge us to follow those stars that lead to Christ. Whether we are rich or cultivated or sorrowful, or a combination in varying degrees **of all** three, our way of life and our possessions will profit us nothing unless they are laid at Christ's feet. In practice this means being a person who worships God; who worships intelligently; who worships consistently; who worships with others who have likewise offered themselves and all that they have to Christ. **AMEN**

Hearing the Gospel for today, we might be excused for thinking that we are back in Advent! Preparing for the coming into the world of Christ. Indeed, the Gospel for the third Sunday in Advent overlaps today's Gospel by the first four verses: about the preaching by John the Baptist of the good news of the coming of the Messiah.

But the theme of this first Sunday after the Epiphany is not so much the coming of Christ, as the baptism of Christ. Each of the four writers of the Gospels has included an account of the occasion in his Gospel, and therefore it was obviously considered by the Early Church to be an event of great importance. It is worth comparing the various versions in the Gospels.

John the Baptist came upon the scene calling people to repentance in expectation of the judgement and the forgiveness of sins that God was to effect through the Messiah who was soon to come among them. He challenged the complacency of those who felt that their salvation was assured because "We have Abraham as our father." (Matt.3:9). Being a descendant of Abraham, one of the Chosen People, or complying with the requirements of the Law of Moses, provided no exemption from the repentance called for by John. To turn from self-centred ways to the coming of the Messiah with all that that implied; to fear His power to judge; and to hope for His forgiveness - these were the supreme requirements from men and women looking for salvation.

This repentance was signified by an act of baptism, and the fact that John was popularly called "The Baptizer indicates the importance of baptism in his mission. Not that there was anything new about baptism: washings and ablutions occurred frequently in the various religious expressions of the time. But the baptism by John had three new features which made it distinctive. First, it was to be received just the once by each person. Second, it was required of everyone - Jew and Gentile, men and women. Thirdly and most importantly, it was firmly linked to another baptism that would be administered through that Mightier One who was soon to appear.

In St. Mark's Gospel, John is quoted as saying: "I have baptized you with water: but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (1:8) Matthew and Luke add: "and with fire." (3:11 & 3:16 respectively) It is probable that the words "with the Holy Spirit" are an addition to John's message, springing from the later Christian understanding of baptism in Christ. Certainly a baptism "with fire" would be more in keeping with John's message of judgment, for purification by fire was a familiar metaphor for judgment. Those who received John's baptism of water, confessing their sins in true repentance, and awaiting the imminent coming of the Messiah, had the assurance that in the Messiah's baptism of fire, their sins would be forgiven. Probably we are to understand that what is involved here is the purifying power of the Holy Spirit which burns up all that is evil.

Because Jesus believed that John was the bearer of a God-given message, He went to him and sought baptism. This has raised a problem. John's baptism was for the remission of sins. Why, we might ask, was this necessary, when Jesus was as we believe, completely sinless? Possibly Jesus, at that point of time, was not 100% certain that He was the Messiah - it was as He arose from the waters of baptism that He heard the confirming words of the Father: "You are my Son, the Beloved." According to Matthew's account, in answer to John's reluctance to baptize Him, Jesus replied: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." (3:15) In other words, Jesus was baptized because it was God's will as declared by Jesus Himself. John's call to baptism was to the whole nation, and in His baptism, Jesus identified Himself with the sinful nation and with those who were anticipating God's decisive action in the near future. With

them He looked beyond the formal channels of God's activity to a direct and immediate revelation of His power in some new way.

The baptism by John was a moment of crisis and decision in Jesus' life. As Luke recorded, 'when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form, like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are My Son, My Beloved: with You I am well pleased."' From this moment on, Jesus set out in the path of His messianic ministry, which culminated on the Cross.

Jesus emerged from His baptism with the question: 'what course of action was He to take in view of the impending crisis proclaimed by John, and His new relationship with God manifested in the baptism experience?' It is not surprising that Jesus withdrew into the desert!

John's message, springing from the later Christian understanding of baptism in Christ. Certainly a baptism "with fire" would be more in keeping with John's message of judgment, for purification by fire was a familiar metaphor for judgment. Those who received John's baptism of water, confessing their sins in true repentance, and awaiting the imminent coming of the Messiah, had the assurance that in the Messiah's baptism of fire, their sins would be forgiven. Probably we are to understand that what is involved here is the purifying power of the Holy Spirit which burns up all that is evil.

Because Jesus believed that John was the bearer of a God-given message, He went to him and sought baptism. This has raised a problem. John's baptism was for the remission of sins. Why, we might ask, was this necessary, when Jesus was as we believe, completely sinless? Possibly Jesus, at that point of time, was not 100% certain that He was the Messiah - it was as He arose from the waters of baptism that He heard the confirming words of the Father: "You are my Son, the Beloved." According to Matthew's account, in answer to John's reluctance to baptize Him, Jesus replied: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." (3:15) In other words, Jesus was baptized because it was God's will as declared by Jesus Himself. John's call to baptism was to the whole nation, and in His baptism, Jesus identified Himself with the sinful nation and with those who were anticipating God's decisive action in the near future. With them He looked beyond the formal channels of God's activity to a direct and immediate revelation of His power in some new way.

The baptism by John was a moment of crisis and decision in Jesus' life. As Luke recorded, 'when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form, like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are My Son, My Beloved: with You I am well pleased."' From this moment on, Jesus set out in the path of His messianic ministry, which culminated on the Cross.

Jesus emerged from His baptism with the question: 'what course of action was He to take in view of the impending crisis proclaimed by John, and His new relationship with God manifested in the baptism experience?'

**AMEN**

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

From the Book of Common Prayer, 1662: *"Holy Matrimony is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and His Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with His presence, and first miracle that He wrought, in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of St. Paul to be honorable among all men: and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.*

***First**, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of His holy name. **Secondly**, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's Body. **Thirdly**, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity."*

Thus the introduction to the service of Holy Matrimony in the Book of Common Prayer. It lays down a standard echoed and repeated - though in more restrained language - in the subsequent revisions of the Prayer Book in 1928, in the Australian Prayer Book of 1978, and in the most recent Prayer Book for Australia, 1995. These latter services have very much toned down the outspokenness of 1662 - perhaps we really should be more blunt and outspoken!

Of all the unhappy things in this world of ours, few speak more clearly of unhappiness, misery, and the degradation of human relationships than do the divorce courts. The divorce courts do not cause broken marriages - they endeavour to resolve situations of suffering, frustration, and misery. Probably many other marriages go on in unhappiness and bitterness because people refuse to acknowledge their failure.

An unhappy marriage is an evil and dangerous thing. It is certainly not what God intended marriage to be. Two people, lacking genuine affection, uneasy with each other, suspicious, jealous, selfish, grind each other's personality down, and disintegrate them - instead of, as God intended, strengthening and enriching them. Divorce is never a good thing, but often it is the lesser of two evils.

We ought not be surprised to find this situation becoming more and more common in our society today. Our society tends to influence young people into making the wrong choice of partners through overemphasis of sensual excitement, and calling it love; by exalting the individual selfishly above all others - including a marriage partner; by building up an expectation of material luxuries which cannot really be afforded; and physical perfection which is unachievable. How can people brought up under such influences knuckle down to the self-denial which marriage and parenthood requires?

Nevertheless, every year sees a large number of marriages registered, suggesting that the great majority of people do believe in the institution of marriage, and of course see their marriage as one which will not fail.

Today in the Gospel reading we have placed before us the happy picture of the marriage in Cana of Galilee. A great social occasion in the life of the community. The mother of Jesus was there, and so was Jesus and His disciples. So too probably was the whole village - marriage celebrations in those days meant open house. And the wine ran out! Social disaster!! Feeling that nothing could be allowed to mar the happiness of the great day, Mary appealed to her Son. Does He sound a little pompous? "Woman, what

concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Was He concerned about using His power for such a trivial thing? Just like a mother, Mary ignored His protest, and simply said to the servants: "Just do what He wants." And Jesus graciously saved the situation. By that miracle at Cana, Jesus blessed for evermore the natural simple gaiety of people celebrating a social occasion. He endorsed for evermore the joyful celebration of marriage.

This is indeed the proper beginning of Christian marriage. Two people who cannot be happy together; who cannot relax together; who cannot rejoice together, and share each other's burdens, have no real right to undertake marriage, and any marriage they do undertake carries a high risk of failure. But a joyful beginning is only a start. Life is not all gaiety. Much of it is serious and even grim. With it, very often, comes sadness and suffering. Marriage goes on through all these things: "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health", and the two pledge to love and cherish each other throughout, until death parts them. This partnership, which is to stand heavy strains and to weather many storms, is the bringing together of two distinct personalities. If the mutual choice has been good, these distinct personalities will complement each other, and aid each other towards fulfillment. This goal cannot be reached except through self sacrifice.: it will always demand from both sides a deliberate limitation of personal freedom. The growing together of two people of different outlook, temperament, and background calls for a high degree of patience and understanding, as well as active affection. Although mankind is made in the divine image, the intrusion of evil makes it difficult for us to be unselfish all the time, and blurs the ideals of kindness, consideration, and self-denial. Christian marriage, requiring promises of such magnitude, and demanding a new way of life needing such high qualities of character, was never meant for people who do not accept the teaching of Christ, and who never turn to Him for the reinforcement of His grace. Marriage is a Christian institution, taken over by the State and by general acceptance as the proper thing.

But did St. John record the incident of that marriage at Cana just because it saw our Lord's first miracle? Or was it to say that because the disciples saw Him turn water into wine they believed in Him? After all, none of the other three Evangelists records this miracle - it is unique to St. John. And John only recorded seven miracles in his whole Gospel! And to supply a further 120 or so gallons of wine when the guests had already drunk well is hardly human wisdom, let alone divine, even if as was the custom the party went on for some days!

In writing his Gospel, John was much more concerned about drawing attention to our Lord's divinity in every incident he records, rather than worrying too much about mere chronological sequence, and the progressive unfolding of the revelation that Jesus was God Incarnate. That had already been done by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So John cheerfully records that the wedding was on the third day after our baptism, ignoring the 40 days and nights of temptation in the wilderness spoken of by the others. The third day is a significant reminder of the resurrection of course, when as every Christian account affirms, Jesus was finally and fully manifested as the Christ in His death-conquering glory on the third day. The significance of turning water into wine lies in the contrast between the old inadequate, ritualistic way of religious understanding and expression, and the more than adequate and superabundant wine of celebration and enjoyment in the knowledge of the love of Jesus Christ. The lively and powerful, even heady, working of Christ's new teaching and way of life replaces the impotent Law and the Prophets of traditional Judaism. In the absurdly large provision of a further 120 gallons of wine He indicates that God's generosity and bountiful grace and mercy is full and overflowing and far more abundant than either we may desire or deserve.

Everything that went before was cheap and second-rate: "You have kept the good wine until now!" The Old Covenant has been superseded by the New, which is immeasurably better and far more effective.

"And His disciples believed in Him". Believed, not merely that He could do marvellous things like turning water into wine, but that He was the true Christ, the Saviour. He replaces, if we let Him, the stale flat dullness of a non-religious life, with the heady sparkle of life lived in the knowledge of the love of God, and in the acceptance of that love so freely given. **AMEN**

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

*"Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ ..... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Cor.12:12 & 27)*

Sunday by Sunday, in the service of Holy Communion, we stand to declare that "We are the Body of Christ". It was introduced into the service when the Prayer Book was revised in 1978, and it is an important reminder that we ARE in fact Christ's body on earth. He has no hands but ours to do His will. However there are times when we might say those words almost incredulously and almost despairingly: "WE are the body of Christ?" We few, weak, unstable, hesitant, little group who profess and call ourselves Christians and who yet fall so far short of our vocation? What could our Lord have been thinking, to leave His great work to us? But He did! And we just have to get on and make the best of it that we can.

We don't always recognise that the Holy Spirit has provided us - each one of us - with gifts and talents and abilities to enable us to play our proper part as a member of the Body of Christ.

The Church itself is to some extent at fault. We have acted, and many still do act as if the Holy Spirit's gifts of leadership and teaching and organizing are given only to the clergy. As if all these abilities are immediately poured out upon a person at the moment of Ordination! We are tempted to think that if a person is not ordained he or she ought not be opening his or her mouth too much in the affairs of the Church. When a Parish has no Parish Priest and a Consultation is held to enable the parishioners to assess themselves and their needs, a question often put to them is "What gifts would you like your new priest to have?" That list is usually a very long one! Rarely is it said "He need not be very good at such and such, because we are good at that." So the new Parish Priest tries valiantly to fill all the requirements. Most clergy will have a go at doing whatever they are called upon to do, and of course only a few things are done properly, and many things do not get done at all because there is insufficient time to do everything and there is no-one else offering his or her gifts to share the load. One of the great benefits of the current movement for a wider Ministry of the a matter of gifts

The human body has a huge number of parts - some much more obvious than others. But each part has its own particular role and function. As long as each part functions in the way it was meant to, the body is healthy and at ease with itself. We know from our own experience how limiting, how frustrating, how depressing it is, when some part of our own body ceases either temporarily or permanently to do its job properly. In some situations a breakdown of some bodily function will be fatal. It is the same with the Body of Christ, the Church. When each member is exercising his or her gifts for the well-being of all, and with the aim of pleasing God, then the Church is healthy, growing, and developing. When some members are neglecting their gifts, or using them selfishly, or coming into conflict with others of the congregation, then the Church is restricted and retarded and ailing. People become discouraged and fall away; others don't want to be associated with such a group, and stay away. And the Body of Christ is sick. For just like the human body, the Church is either healthy and developing, or it is ailing and degenerating. It is never static. The Body of Christ is not particularly ill. It is a bit off-colour - like we are when we've got a cold in the head: we are not - really 100% but we can manage to cope and keep doing what is necessary.

So what is the cure, what is the tonic needed, what is the spiritual equivalent of Codral Cold Tablets? It is fairly simple to prescribe; it is not all that easy to put into practice. We must each restore our proper

relationships with God and with our neighbours. If we've neglected our prayers, not got around to reading our Bibles for a while, or are aware that our behaviour lately hasn't really been all that God would approve of - of course we will not be able to joyfully and gladly worship Him. So Step 1 is to go back to basics - spend some time each day consciously in the presence of God: praying, meditating, reading a chapter or two of Scripture or perhaps going back over Sunday's Readings.

Step 2 is to restore our interest and concern about other members of the Church family. For example when a youngster wins a prize or a trophy at school, his whole family is proud of him and shares in the success as if it was their own personal triumph. Family ties are strengthened and built up,. As we learn of the successes and joys, or the griefs and failures of others in the Church family, we should reach out to them in rejoicing or in support and comfort. But, we say, we're too shy, we don't really know them. Do people rejoicing in the birth of a child, or success in an exam care that somebody they've not been introduced to says "Good on you! Of course not. Do people grieving over a lost job or the death of a loved one care who it is who says "You have all my sympathy! They appreciate the kind word. A family rejoices together and grieves together.

Many people think of their faith and their salvation as a private matter between themselves and God, and that their Christian life consists of thanking God for it, and living as grateful people. To some extent this is right and proper, but it is just the first stage.

From there we go on to recognize that we are part of a living organism which is crippled when any part is afflicted or distressed. As part of the Body of Christ, we are to support and build up that Body, endeavouring to ensure that each other part is encouraged and strengthened. When our time comes to be weak and frail, - spiritually or physically – we may expect to be supported similarly in our crisis.

We all have gifts. We all have abilities. They are to be used in the building up of the Body of Christ. As St. Paul said, 'You, together, are the Body of Christ and individually members of it. **Amen**

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

*"Strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way." (1 Cor. 12:31)*

That is the last verse of chapter 12 of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, providing an introduction to his familiar and much loved essay on love, which formed the Epistle reading for today. The more excellent way is of course the way of Jesus, and His way is the way of the Father who so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son to redeem it, to bring mankind back from that self-centred course which leads to destruction.

And we heard in the Gospel for today another incident of rejection of Jesus and His way by His own people. As St. John wrote in the introduction to his Gospel: "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not." (1:11) Jesus had returned to His home town of Nazareth after having been baptized by John, and then having spent the forty days in the wilderness working out His destiny and conquering the temptations of Satan to go about it the wrong way. It seems that He intended to begin His ministry in Nazareth. A good churchman, Jesus went to -the synagogue as was His custom on the Sabbath, and He was invited to read the Lesson for the day. It was the custom to ask a layman to read the Lesson and then comment upon it. The invitation suggests that Jesus was a member of the synagogue in good standing, which gives added emphasis to the dramatic pronouncement that He made. After reading from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 61, He applied those words to Himself. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives; and recovery of sight for the blind; to release the oppressed; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." At first apparently His words were well accepted, though with some amazement - after all, He was only the carpenter's son, and well known to them. But when He went on to claim that God's love is not restricted to the Children of Israel, and that it was God's intention to work through His Chosen People for the well-being and salvation of all mankind - then there was consternation and the charge of blasphemy! So, rejection and outright hostility from the very beginning. God's people still, as then, want to restrict His love to themselves - they are not too keen about reaching out to others either in their own neighbourhood or in support of missionary endeavour.

As a general rule. Jesus cited a couple of examples from the Scriptures themselves to show how God extends His love to others than the Chosen Race. There was the widow of Zarephath [Zarr-e-fath] in the time of Elijah, who in a time of great drought and poverty gave Elijah the last of her food. (1 Kings 17:9-) She was not an Israelite, yet because of her willing self-sacrifice for the prophet "the jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruse of oil fail until the day that the Lord sent rain upon the earth, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke by Elijah." (17:14)

And there were plenty of lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, but it was Naaman a commander of the Syrian army (which had often swooped down from the north and raided Israel) who was cured after following the instructions of Elisha. (2 Kings 5:1-) "He went down and dipped himself seven times in the River Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." (5:14) Clearly Jesus was saying: "Reject me and my message of salvation which is for the whole of mankind, and you reject the Father who sent me." In a parallel report of this incident, St. Mark wrote: "They took offence at him. And Jesus said to them: A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house. And he could do no mighty work

there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief." (Mark 6:4-6)

The implied criticism of Israel's lack of faith angered His audience and they were set to kill Him. Thus, quite early in St. Luke's Gospel, the rejection of Jesus by His own people, the Chosen Race, is set out as a prelude to the acceptance of Jesus by the Gentiles. Again quoting St. John's prologue: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." (1:12)

Those originally called, rejected the Gospel, the good news of salvation, with the consequence that it went to others. If we reject our call and opportunity to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour, we too will lose our hope of salvation. But of course we want to remain children of God! Isn't that why we set time aside Sunday by Sunday and come to offer our worship and praise and thanksgiving to our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Inspirer?

"Strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way" - the way of Jesus, the way for a Christian. It is the way of love. Paul, in his great analysis and essay describes its necessity, its character, and its permanence. The reason why we cannot do without love is that unless everything we undertake, and every gift that we might have are inspired by love, we are wasting our time. Even a good deed can be spoilt by being done from the wrong motive. Love is the basis of every virtue. Paul sets out specific details. I may speak with eloquent brilliance; I may have the keenest insight into people and their activities; I may have the kind of inner drive that moves mountains of difficulty; I may even be so devoted to some cause that I am prepared to sacrifice my life for it. Yet if these fine qualities are not inspired and motivated by a real desire for the well-being of my fellow men and women, then it's all pretty empty and a waste. You know the term: "as cold as charity". It means that some generous impulse can be so lacking in real concern, that the person we had intended to help is repelled and insulted.

Then Paul goes on to illustrate what real Christian love is like. First of all it is characterised by its essential kindness and patience. Easy enough to be loving when we're in the mood, but it might wear thin while we wait for someone to respond as we think they should. Love must have no hidden motives of self-interest. No strings attached; not selfish or ego-building; not blatant or bumptious or condescending. How often when we do a good deed we expect something good in return! Love is always prepared to face the truth, however unpalatable, without being unkindly critical or judgmental. Certainly, slander, spite and malicious comment are out, as well as envy and jealousy, which only lead to the upsetting of relationships. And furthermore, love is characterised by its determination never to give up. There is no limit to its extent. On one occasion Peter **said** to Jesus: "Lord how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matt.18:21)

That love God has for us - kindness and patience, for our own sakes, not His; accepting us as we are; not giving us up. That is what we reject, if we reject Him. St. John, sometimes known as the apostle of love, summed it all up in his first Epistle, when he wrote: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him ..... We love, because he first loves us ..... And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God, should love his brother also." (1 John 4) **AMEN**