

December 2010

Dear neighbours,

For just over 8 years I have been writing a bi-monthly pastoral letter and this is the 50th. Not all of you will have received them all, for from time to time we alter the distribution patterns. But there will be core areas which will have received each one.

In all of them, in one way or another, I have tried to encourage you to begin the Christian pathway, or to continue in it, in a society which has swung dramatically away from this land's Christian heritage. Now, there is no new thing under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1.9) and possibly the pendulum will swing back again in the next 100 years. As individuals living in a down time we need every encouragement to continue in the Christian faith. If the gospel is not preached from so many pulpits as it once was and will be again maybe, we could find ourselves individually in the unenviable situation of not hearing it or believing it. Many before us did believe and many after us will. But this is our day and these are perilous times (2 Timothy 3.1) for faith. It would be easier not to believe than to hold fast the faith of Christ. So I have tried to be an encouragement to faith.

Next year sees a much more significant anniversary. In 1611 the most famous English translation of the Bible of all time appeared. Some think it is the best in any language out of all translations. We know it as the Authorised Version (AV) and it will be 400 years old. Some countries call it the King James Version (KJV). It has done more to influence the 400 years through which it has passed than any other literature. It has been called "the greatest monument of English prose".

The Lord Jesus Christ was born in the fullness of time when the Roman Empire was at its height; and despite its undoubted cruelties Rome was the nerve centre of such road systems as enabled the gospel to spread widely and rapidly. The Authorised Version came to the fore at the time when Great Britain was building an Empire and therefore likewise used for the spreading of the Gospel – with this difference, that the Bible influenced that impetus and the very character of beneficence which, for the most part, made the Empire a blessing. With the decline of the Biblical gospel with its attendant morality and love the Empire has almost passed away.

The Bible begins "In the beginning God created..." and the upsurge of evolution has encouraged a decline in faith, declaring that life is meaningless, there is no purpose and it must be everyone for himself. So lawlessness and cruelty begin to dominate and the love founded on God's law is banished. Solomon discovered such purposelessness in his day when he turned away from God, and was enraptured when he returned to faith. The Bible puts these two experiences side by side in the books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, the one describing world weariness, the other exaltation through the rediscovery of faith and the love of God.

My purpose is always to encourage you to read the Bible; to read it in the best of versions; and to discover its purpose, namely salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible itself is much more than 400 years old. The Old Testament was completed well before Christ's time with some parts dating back 1000 years or more before that. The New Testament was completed before 200 AD. You could say that it is a library of books.

Christians, for the most part, believe that, though it is penned by many different authors, they were inspired by the Spirit of God, and that He "breathed out" the words (as the word is in 2 Timothy 3.16) and they breathed it in; in other words were inspired in a supreme way.

It has given us many expressions which we often use – "eye to eye", "good for nothing", "the skin of my teeth", "fat as grease", "feet of clay", "upside down" and many, many others. It was the Lord Jesus

whose own inventive use of His own language gives us “good for nothing” for example. He said to His disciples, “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men” (Matthew 5.13 in the Sermon on the Mount). I have enjoyed writing these letters as a “labour of love”.

Some things are old fashioned as you would expect because of age. But its accuracy and skilfulness of translation are not recaptured in other versions. It is the best and it is worth mastering those words which are dated for the things which other translations, for one reason or another, do not reproduce.

But it is not just a literary treat, as some would find Shakespeare, or Dickens; Keats or Tennyson. It is more than an intellectual stimulus, though it is that. Its lofty teachings create morality. But even that is not its purpose. Its purpose is to unfold the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, as authoritatively sent by our heavenly Father (God) to reveal a personal salvation to those who believe. More than that it creates the actual faith, as Paul writes, “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10.17). It is more than memorable language alone, for the Holy Spirit speaks to lodge its words in our minds. And not our minds merely but those loftiest of all benefits, eternal salvation and the forgiveness of sins, in our souls. And, still more, to encounter (as we read) the noblest of all beings, even God the Father, God the Son who is the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Holy Spirit.

I would love you to read it and be caught away. As a child who learns to read is transported to another realm of things way beyond home and reliance upon the stories which parents tell, so the Bible reader may read of realms he/she never dreamed of where the things which are not seen and are eternal (2 Corinthians 4.18) predominate.

You can begin anywhere. The two most obvious approaches are to begin at the beginning or at the beginning of the New Testament, and to punctuate each reading with a Psalm.

You are always welcome to our services in which we always explain a portion of the Bible. You might wish to make a special effort over Christmas. On Sundays 19th December and 26th our services will be at 10.45am and 2pm and on Christmas Day at 1030am.

Please accept the enclosed calendar with our compliments. It is indeed our prayer that the chosen passages from the Bible (AV) would be a help and encouragement at some point each month.