The second part of our story - the New Testament - begins in a climate of expectation.

The Messiah, God’s chosen deliverer, is expected at any moment. The people are exhorted to prepare themselves for his coming but when he arrives he is totally different from what anyone expects.

Jesus is a carpenter who has lived most of his life in and around the town of Nazareth.

About the year 28 CE he gathers together a small band of disciples and sets out on a mission to his home province of Galilee.

He claims that he has been sent by God to announce the coming of a new order, a Kingdom ruled by God. He tells stories and paints word pictures to describe the Kingdom of God and he performs acts of healing which, he says, are signs of the Kingdom.

But the people can’t hear him. They are impressed by his healing powers but his teaching is too demanding, his way too hard. He tries one last time to get the Galileans to understand his message but he knows he has failed when an unruly crowd tries to force him to be their leader.

So Jesus leaves Galilee and spends his time with the small band of followers who have at least started to glimpse something of his truth. He tells them they will be the nucleus of the new order - a New Israel - which will fulfill the task the old Israel has failed to accomplish.

Meanwhile, opposition to Jesus and his teaching is mounting. The Jewish authorities see in him a challenge to orthodox religion and they set out to destroy him and his mission.

Instead of running from their threats, Jesus decides to go to Jerusalem to confront them, even though he knows he risks a violent death. His disciples, against their better judgement, go with him.

In Jerusalem he goes to the temple where he challenges the religious leaders on their home ground. The outcome is inevitable. After a final meal with his disciples he is betrayed, then tried and executed as a political usurper and as a menace to the rule of law.

His body is given a decent but hasty burial in a tomb belonging to a well-to-do sympathizer.

Three days after the execution, those same disciples who had followed Jesus to Jerusalem in fear and trembling, and who had all fallen away during the time of his trial, suddenly begin to proclaim that he is alive and living with them in a deeper sense than ever before.

The story of the Church

For six weeks the disciples enjoy a close relationship with the Risen Jesus. But then he leaves them with the promise that he will send his Spirit to accompany them and give them strength for the job they must do.

On the Day of Pentecost the promised Spirit comes to the disciples and they begin preaching the good news of God’s new deliverance. They call on their fellow citizens to turn from the ways of their fathers and to be baptised into the New Israel.

The new community enjoys the favour of the ordinary people. They are obviously devout, they care for one another, and they are regular in their attendance at the temple.

But the Jewish leaders are not so well disposed towards the new sect and their opposition soon becomes evident.

As well, problems begin to appear within the Christian community. There are those who believe that membership of the New

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Israel must be limited to Jews, while a more liberal group begins to question this prejudice.

The Jewish leaders see their chance to move against the sect and they execute Stephen, one of the leaders of the liberal faction, on a charge of heresy. The consequent persecution of those who support Stephen forces the members of the liberal faction to flee from Jerusalem, taking their gospel with them.

So the new faith begins to spread beyond Jerusalem, into the surrounding countryside.

Meanwhile, Saul of Tarsus, a Jewish teacher of some influence, is converted to the new faith. He becomes the chief defender of the Church and devotes himself tirelessly to the proclamation and spread of the Christian gospel.

The rest of the story consists mainly of a collection of letters from leaders of the Church to the young Christian churches that were founded outside Jerusalem.

These letters witness to the growing pains of the early Church, to opposition and persecution, and to the disputes concerning belief and authority that inevitably arose as the Church struggled to adjust a Jewish faith to a non-Jewish world.

And finally there is the puzzling Book of Revelation.

The Book of Revelation arose out of persecution. Christians were being harassed and killed because of their refusal to participate in Caesar worship, the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The author of the Book of Revelation - himself a captive on the prison island of Patmos - exhorts his Christian brothers and sisters to stand firm in the face of persecution.

Of necessity, he employs a code language, much of which is unintelligible to us. But even though many of his original meanings are lost, it is still possible for us to appreciate his vision of the ultimate victory of God.

Think about it

There have always been Christians who would have it that the Bible is totally free from error and true in every part, the very 'Word of God'. But Archbishop Michael Ramsey reminded us that: 'The central fact of Christianity is not a book but a Person - Jesus Christ, himself described as the Word of God'. This attitude has enabled Anglicans to avoid the idolatry of Biblical Literalism and Fundamentalism and has allowed us the freedom to study and evaluate the various books of the Bible.

Consequently, over the past one hundred and fifty years, Christian scholars have subjected the Bible to a scholarly examination such as no other book has ever endured. In the process some sacred cows have been slaughtered and some golden calves have been destroyed but the story of God in the Bible has emerged from the experience with a renewed and vigorous authority.

The Bible is still a book of power. Its words continue to change the lives of those who pick it up and read it. And the voice of Jesus, the Word of God, speaks even more powerfully from its pages.

The only sure rule is to remember that the Bible is indeed God's gift to the church, to equip that church for its work in the world, and that serious study of it can and should become one of the places where, and the means by which, heaven and earth interlock and God's future purposes arrive in the present.

- Bishop N T Wright