

12th March

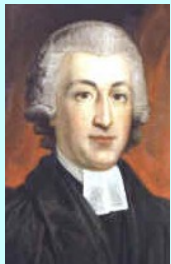
Memory Verse:

There is no God like thee, in heaven above or on earth beneath. I Kings 8:23

These are the words of Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived,¹ and they are worth learning. Very small children can learn the words in bold and understand that “thee” is like the word “you” but only means one person, never more than one.

Watching the weather²

March has a reputation for being a windy month. That was certainly the case in 1782. On **12th March** that year the Rev. James Woodforde made the following entry in his diary:



About noon the wind rose higher and blew quite a hurricane till sun-setting. The wind being so high frightened greatly myself and Nancy [Woodford's niece and housekeeper], but I thank God we received no damage. The tiles from my cellar and the old part of my house were some of them blown down, with some thatch from the north-west corner of the new part of the house. I never knew the wind continue so long and so high. It made me quite ill and took away my appetite. A great deal of damage I apprehend must have been done to the shipping, and likewise houses etc. on land. Pray God! Have mercy on all the poor sufferers – and accept O Lord, my sincere thanks for what we have escaped.

How windy is it today? If you did the lesson for 24th November last year you will already know all about how to estimate wind speed, or you can find out how to do it by looking up the Beaufort Scale in your encyclopedias and reference books. Don't forget to keep up your own diary and make a note in it of the weather each day. Or how about devising your own set of small symbols for various types and intensities of weather that would be simple to draw each day?³ Make a key to your symbols and include one or more in your diary entry every day.

Something to sing



Today is the anniversary of the birth of Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676), the German hymn-writer. Gerhardt experienced much suffering in his life he and the congregation he served lived through the horrors of the Thirty Years' War. His family life was also tragic. Four of his five children died young, and his wife also died after a long illness.

Gerhardt's hymns were beloved of the composer J S Bach and he incorporated many of them into his cantatas. His hymns are sung in English in translations by John Wesley and by Catherine Winkworth. Look in your hymn book; see if you can find some of them and sing one today.

¹ Apart from the Lord Jesus Christ himself, of course.

² Adapted from Owen, Evan, *What Happened Today?* Book 2 available on the *Mothers' Companion* flashdrive <https://motherscompanion.weebly.com/>

³ Ideas here: <https://www.creativecenter.brother/en-gb/home/home-category/learning-activities/worksheets/weather-symbols-worksheet>

Something to read from history⁴

In this story there are some **places to look** up so get out your atlas before you start and you will be able to understand this story much more clearly.

12th March 537AD was a day of rejoicing for the weary citizens of **Rome**. The great Byzantine general Belisarius (500-565AD) had saved the city from the besieging Ostrogoths and now they and Belisarius's troops stood on the battered walls of the city cheering. They jeered too, for they could see the Ostrogoths burning their camps and packing their gear. They had given up the attempt on Rome and were on their way back to their capital city, **Ravenna**.

If you look at your atlas you will see that **Italy** is a peninsula sticking out into the **Mediterranean Sea**. During the latter part of the fifth century BC, the peninsula was controlled by the Ostrogoths. Ostrogoths means "eastern Goths" and they came from near the **Black Sea** from countries we now call Romania, Ukraine and Russia. At this time the Goths were taking over much of the old Roman Empire in Western Europe. Led by Theodoric the Great, (454-526AD) the Ostrogoths dominated Italy, expanding their territories from the Black Sea into the peninsula and farther west.

I have said that the general who was defending Rome against the Ostrogoths was a Byzantine general. What does this mean? In 395AD the Roman Empire split into two parts. The Emperor moved his court to Byzantium or Constantinople in the Eastern half.⁵ The modern name of this city is **Istanbul**. The Ostrogoths still acknowledged the Roman Emperor as overlord but in practice their kingdom was independent.

When Theodoric the Great died the Ostrogoth's territory descended into chaos. The Roman Emperor, Justinian I decided to intervene; now was the moment, he decided to get back the old Western part of the empire! He sent his most able general, Belisarius, to accomplish the task.

Belisarius had defeated the Sasanian Persians in Mesopotamia (part of modern **Iraq, Kuwait, Syria** and **Turkey**), as well as the Vandals in **Africa**. He had also saved the emperor from an insurrection at home in Constantinople. He was a natural leader whose men adored him for his fairness and his willingness to listen to advice from his subordinates. He inspired and demanded complete obedience: this was the only way he could lead an army made up of recruits from all over the empire.

Belisarius captured **Sicily**, crossed over to Rhegium (modern name **Reggio di Calabria**) and then took **Naples**. His next objective was Rome. In those days Rome was a shadow its former self. Since the city was sacked by the Visigoths in 410AD it had been in decline. Many of the inhabitants had moved elsewhere leaving empty buildings and its once proud monuments were in ruins. In the old Roman Forum, once the nerve centre of an empire, cows grazed. Nevertheless, Rome was still the largest city in Western Europe and Belisarius knew he needed to take it if he was to regain control of the old Western Empire.

The Ostrogoth King, Theodahad (c.480-536AD) was totally ineffectual and the Ostrogoths, exasperated by his failure to defend them, chose a new king, Vitiges (d. 542AD). Vitiges garrisoned Rome with troops and then departed for Ravenna. However, the citizens of Rome supported the Emperor. Besides they had heard what Belarius had done to Naples and did not want to suffer the same fate.

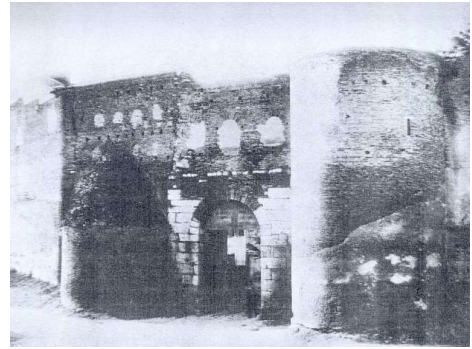
⁴ Image of a Roman aqueduct By Alexxant - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=65208690> Information from *W B Marsh and Bruce Carrick 366 A Leap Year of Great Stories* (Cambridge, 2007) and other sources.

⁵ More on this in the lesson for on 29th May



Although the Emperor lived at Constantinople, the Pope still had his seat here in Rome and was the most powerful leader in the city. He sent a delegation to Belarius. Vitigies' men were now fearful. What could they do if Belisarius attacked? The citizens would open the gates to him and he would slaughter them all. So as Belisarius's soldiers marched in through the Asinarian Gate (which you can see in the picture on the left) Vitigies' soldiers marched out through the Flaminian Gate (which no longer exists in its Roman form).

Vitiges sent his commander to plead with the citizens of Rome not to go over to Belisarius. He stood at the Salarian Gate (right) and begged them. But it was to no avail. Rome was, after 60 years of Ostrogoth rule, back in Roman hands. So now the Ostrogoths began to besiege the city.



The siege was one of the most remarkable in all history. It lasted for a year and nine days the city was held by just 5,000 soldiers against an army of over 100,000. The wall of Rome were some 12 miles in extent and the huge Ostrogoth army encircled the city. Belisarius had catapults placed at strategic points and had a deep ditch dig beneath the walls. The **River Tiber** also made the city vulnerable as the enemy might row up it with boats to attack. Belisarius therefore had a chain stretched across the river and a garrison placed in a nearby fort.



Finding himself defeated at every turn, Vitigies pondered what to do. He hit on a plan of forcing the city to surrender by cutting off its water supply. Water was carried into Rome by means of aqueducts. You can see the remains of one in the picture on the left. He set his men to work to divert the aqueducts to a spot near his own camps. Alas for the Ostrogoths! The plan was a disaster. The water diverted from the aqueducts quickly formed swamps infested with deadly malaria that decimated Vitigies's own troops.

What about siege towers then? Vitigies had his engineers build four huge ones and ordered them to be brought up, drawn by oxen, and emplaced by the walls. This failed too. Belisarius's men were good shots and as the towers approached he ordered them not to fire at the enemy soldiers – only at the oxen. The siege towers had to be abandoned where they stood.

As well as defensive tactics Belisarius knew he had to attack. He had far fewer men than the Ostrogoths but his cavalry was outstanding. They were trained to fire from a heavy bow while riding and to do so in every direction. Steady practice at this technique had made them masters of every angle including the difficult “Parthian shot” where the rider, either fleeing or pretending to do so, turns right round in the saddle and fires at his pursuers. Supporting this lethal cavalry were infantry soldiers with axes, spears and swords. Given the huge length of the walls, Belisarius could not defend every point. He therefore concentrated on surprise sorties from the city. His mounted archers would begin the attack and put to flight the Ostrogoth cavalry. Once they were out of the way, the Ostrogoth infantry were left unprotected and demoralised. Belisarius's infantry slaughtered them in raid after raid.

Nevertheless it was a tough assignment and Belisarius knew that the Roman citizens might open the gates to the Ostrogoths if victory did not come swiftly, fearing what would happen to them if the Ostrogoths overran the city in the end. He sent word to the Emperor Justinian asking for aid. But as time went on and Belisarius gained more victories the Roman citizens became more confident and volunteered to join with the soldiers in fighting the enemy. But one prominent Roman turned out to be a traitor. Pope Silverius smuggled out a message to Vitigies offering to surrender the city! Belisarius had him deposed and exiled.

Eventually after many delays the emperor's reinforcements arrived and with them supplied for the hungry city. Now there was no holding Belisarius. The siege was lifted on **12th March** 537AD and the defeated Ostrogoths retreated to Ravenna.

Something to think about for older children

Interestingly, Belisarius has gone down in history as a general who was not only successful but humane. The example is cited of his treatment of the people of Syracuse and Libya who had once been ruled by Rome. When on campaign he did not allow his soldiers to plundering or requisition supplies from local farmers but he paid for whatever was needed, severely punishing soldiers who disobeyed this order and took things for themselves. War is a cruel and awful manifestation of human sinfulness – in our own day as well as in ancient times – and it is a pleasant thing to read of a general more kind than the rest. He is also credited with being motivated in this respect by Christian principles. There are many “ifs” here. If he was humane, and if he was so motivated we can look to him as an example where even a distorted form of Christianity has good effects in the world. One eighteenth century novelist put these words into his mouth, “Minds are not Enlightened by the Flames of an Executioner’s Pyre”.⁶ This author, writing from the perspective of the French Revolution, is making an interesting point which could also be applied to the guillotine which robbed France of so many great minds.

6 Jean-François Marmontel (1723-1799). A pyre is a heap of fuel gathered together for burning. It is associated with burning a dead body.