

Newsletter 38

As I write this last newsletter of 2021, it is still dark outside, there is the lovely aroma of the Christmas tree, I am surrounded by tasks still to complete – cards to deliver, sermons to finalise, shopping and cooking plans – and yet I feel unusually calm and peaceful! I think this is due to last night's Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, beautifully led by the choir and readers, which reminded us of the great and wonderful truths we celebrate in this season – God came to us in his son, the baby Jesus, to show his love for all the world – you and me - 'the true light, which enlightens everyone ...' 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory' (John 1.9,14).

This past year has been a challenging and demanding year as we have had some sad losses in the congregation, we said farewell to Peter Ingram at the end of May and Covid continues. Yet there is a good feeling of travelling together in all of this, and we have had things to celebrate with baptisms, weddings and new life! I think we have worked together well in all that this year has brought and I am grateful to all who have contributed so much to the ongoing life of the parish. I feel well supported at this busy time. The church wardens have done an amazing job in taking responsibility for running the church while doing all the tasks associated with preparing to appoint a new priest, not to mention mastering Zoom!

I am grateful for all of the visiting clergy who have shared in the leading of services, each bringing their insights and perceptions of our parish. Bishop Sophie's Advent 3 sermon (attached) includes some encouraging observations of our parish and some thoughtful comments about this period of waiting. Mike Morton-Thorpe has been a wonderful colleague in helping lead Sunday services, Morning prayer and the Advent course and I especially appreciate him sharing in preaching (latest sermon attached) and deaconing. I am heartened that others have also been willing to do the deacon role occasionally and hope this will continue.

As the end of this year approaches, let us remember in our prayers all those in our parish in any kind of need, especially the sick and the bereaved. Let us also give thanks for the love and life we experience in our parish and our worship together.

I pray that this Christmas season will be a time of peace and blessing for all and that we will continue to journey together into 2022 with hope and expectation!

Happy Christmas,

Love and best wishes

Angie

SERMON ADVENT 4 2021

Micah 5.2-5a; Hebrews 10.5-10; Luke 1.39-55

Last Tuesday I opened St. Johns for Morning Prayer and went in. As I looked towards the altar I saw that the altar had been turned round to become a stable for the Nativity figures to be placed there later. Usually I would look, register it and prepare for Morning Prayer.

Instead I was struck immediately by the thought that I myself was on a journey to Bethlehem myself, and not just to find the Christ-child but also to find Jesus the teacher and healer and Saviour. Further still I was thinking about the nature of that journey on which I had embarked years ago, but also of the journey we embark on for the rest of our lives – and perhaps even after life has ended.

It stayed with me until I got home and scribbled it down so as not to forget it.

The next day, just as I was unlocking the door of St John's a young woman with a small child appeared and asked if the church was open and could they come in because she had always wanted to see inside the church. Of course I took them in, put on the lights for them, and let them wander round. From time to time I went to see if there was anything they needed. And the little boy, aged 3, pointed to the stable and said "Where's Jesus?"

Where's Jesus? A bit later he was climbing up into the pulpit as though about to deliver a sermon.

Co-incidence probably but it seemed to chime with my thoughts.

The Advent course we are exploring this year has made us think about the feelings and expectations about what might lie ahead of Mary going to her cousin, Elizabeth, to talk about what seemed to be happening to her. And Elizabeth pondering the future role of her own as yet unborn child. Later with Joseph heading to Bethlehem for a census. Shepherds looking after sheep, down-to-earth men, find themselves moved to go into Bethlehem to look for a new-born baby. Gentle travellers carrying gifts whilst following a star. All thinking perhaps that there's a reason for all this but it hasn't happened yet. No idea that other travellers existed and were on the same journey to find....what?

What they did find was the child and it changed their lives.

But the rest of their lives must have been wanting to find out more about the child, the man he became, what happened to him and why, what it all meant, why God should be involved in all this, and what that meant. Questions we keep asking ourselves and sharing answers with one another.

And when we revisit the stories, we find that somehow what was happening reflects our world today!

Tyrannical rulers capable of terrible acts of cruelty; innocent children dying to safeguard a dictator's power, refugees fleeing to save their lives, going to a strange land, uncertain of what would happen to them,, how they would be received and whether they would ever be able to return to their home.

A child born into a violent world, who was to die a violent death!

We wouldn't be human if we didn't ask questions, perhaps feel sometimes we are getting answers, but answers which lead to more questions, which lead us to examine our own lives, and to ask whether or not we are responding adequately to what we have learned and accepted as truth.

If God has somehow entered our world in Christ to give humankind a chance of something better, are we co-operating with him, being his eyes and hands and a voice of hope?

The theologian and philosopher Austin Farrer wrote this:

"...our God is a God who does nothing in vain He has not put us here to waste our time, or to suffer mere frustration; there's something to be done here for God's glory ,and for man's well-being.....We have only to put ourselves into God's hands for hope to spring fresh out of the present day, and reach forward and claim tomorrow. "

He goes on to ask " How could we make sense of the journey if we didn't know where the road leads?"

One day we shall be before God cured of our self-love, able to return at long last the love that has been lavished on us, and reflecting back the light with which we have been illuminated.'

He ends: "To that blessed consummation therefore may he lead all those for whom we pray, he who is love himself, who came to us at Bethlehem, and took us by the hand" on a life-long journey starting at Bethlehem and asking for ever afterwards ' where and who is Jesus ' -and finding he is, in fact, always beside us on that journey. Amen.

+ Sophie's sermon – Advent 3 2021

Zephaniah 3.14-end Philippians 4.4-7 Luke 3.7-18

It is wonderful to be with you here at Saint John's this morning. I have had the opportunity to meet some of you during my time as Bishop of Doncaster, but it is very good to see you on home ground. As we come to this third Sunday in Advent, I suspect there will be a mixture of emotions as this week we have responded to yet further guidance from the government about this wretched coronavirus. And perhaps like me you have had rather enough now. Well, I hope to bring some words of encouragement from God's word today as we reflect on our Bible readings but first let us pray: Loving God, you are always more ready to receive us than we are to come to you. Help us now to hear what you would have us hear and equip us that we may serve you more faithfully in our lives this week. In Jesus' name, Amen.

So, our gospel reading this morning is not for the faint hearted. We have no real idea how those who came out to be baptised by John felt in response to his words 'you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire,' but so hungry were they that they ask in response 'what then should we do?'. In verse 15 we are told that the people were filled with expectation. In other words, they were waiting, waiting for something extremely important to them and this morning I want to think with you about what God has to say to us about waiting. Now, as you will know, waiting and anticipation and even expectation are all Advent themes. No doubt this will not be the first time you have thought about this as Advent unfolds each year. We live in the expectation that the Lord will return and in anticipation of his coming and yet we do so in the light of his having already come, so it is an 'in between' time. Some theologians call this time 'realised eschatology', 'realised' because it has already happened in Christ's first coming and also has not fully happened yet and 'eschaton' means end things or talk of end things. So here we are, in between the middle and the end. Some writers talk about different acts within the drama of salvation history creation when God made the world - the fall when humanity messed up the world, redemption when Jesus came into the world and died for love of the world, the birth of the church and now here we are in the penultimate act before the end of all things. There have been times in church history when the end appeared to loom closer but we don't know how long; we simply wait in anticipation and expectation of our Lord's return.

One of the things that became very clear to me when I read your draft parish profile recently was your passion for justice here in this mission area. This is heartening, to see your commitment to fair trade and issues relating to the care of the environment especially in the light of COP 26. In response to their question, what then should we do?, John the Baptist replies in these terms: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

Justice looms large in his response: share from your excess with those who lack, and this is not simply a message for the good guys. Even tax collectors came to be baptised. In other words, those coming to seek out the Messiah were from all sections of society. As they await the coming Messiah, the one who would come after John, they are to pay attention to justice.

We too, as we await our Lords return, are to be those who pay attention to justice, to live out the righteousness of God in our daily lives wherever we are and wherever God has placed us. Waiting is never easy, at least not for most of us, but there is clarity here about the fact that a time of waiting is not to be wasted but rather an opportunity to display the heart of God and his care for those in need. This same care is displayed in the book of the prophet Zephaniah when those who are most vulnerable - the orphaned, the widowed - are counted among those who are closest to God's heart. They were economically dependent on others for their lives so the law required that the Gershom, the alien, could glean from the edges of the field to gather what was left in order to survive - just one of the ways that God provided. And in times of distress and tumult, God promises to quiet his people with his love and sing over them with rejoicing. This too is God's heart for those who trust in him and those most vulnerable, the least able to care for themselves. The image is one of almost parental tenderness or at least parenting of the most gentle and loving kind towards the children of God.

In a time of waiting, we show the heart of God for justice, and we receive his heart of love. This does not protect us from impatience, frustration or even anger. There is quite a lot of this about at the moment. As I said at the beginning, I have had enough of this virus now and some have had a considerable amount of sorrow resulting from it. There are times when we find it very hard to simply wait.

Well, our New Testament reading has something to add here: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

In a time of waiting, pray to the God of peace. Often when I have been ministering among someone in distress or a family in a difficult situation there has been a feeling of almost helplessness, what to do in the face of a cancer diagnosis for a precious teenage son, brother, friend. What words to say when it is clear that Mum is slipping away and that death has come close, how to comfort a family when they receive the news that no heartbeat can be detected. And yet in the face of these moments of waiting and seeking to reflect the heart of God, it is in prayer that God has come and attended his dear children. I will never forget being called to Pat’s bedside to find her in a state of terrible distress and then just moments later as we shared the words of psalm 27, a tangible peace came over her body and she relaxed, and I knew that God had quieted her with his love.

As a mission area you have been waiting to move on and to move into a new season with a new priest, alongside Dore and Totley. I expect that this has at times been frustrating and not a small amount of additional work. But I want to encourage you that this is not wasted time: this is also time to seek the heart of God and receive his heart of justice and also to know his gift of peace. Nothing is ever wasted in God’s economy. In this third Sunday of Advent as we await the coming king in glory. I want to finish with a prayer inspired by St Benedict. Benedict, known as the father of western monasticism, was an Abbott whose legacy was the rule of Benedict, which he devised to order the life of the monks. In particular, each day should reflect the service of God through manual labour, spiritual reading and prayer and this prayer is crafted by the contemporary priest and poet Malcolm Guite:

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Benedict

You sought to start a simple school of prayer,
A modest, gentle, moderate attempt,
With nothing made too harsh or hard to bear,
No treating or retreating with contempt,
A little rule, a small obedience
That sets aside, and tills the chosen ground,
Fruitful humility, chosen innocence,
A binding by which freedom might be found
You call us all to live, and see good days,
Centre in Christ and enter in his peace,
To seek his Way amidst our many ways,
Find blessedness in blessing, peace in praise
To clear and keep for Love a sacred space
That we might be beginners in God's grace.

Beginners in God's grace. Waiting time is a time to seek justice and peace – so may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.