

Newsletter 17 – January 2021

Dear all

We hope you had a good Christmas – no doubt, it was like no other! We wish you a very happy and healthy 2021.

Peter writes: “I’m sure many of you have been wondering about church services now we are, once again, in lockdown.

I met with the Churchwardens and Deputy Wardens this week to discuss the on-site public worship. It was decided to suspend Sunday Worship in both churches for the foreseeable future. I'm sure you will appreciate this decision hasn't been easy, but our main priority is everyone's health and well-being.

We will endeavour to keep the churches opening times for private prayer and will continue to Zoom Sunday Services and Morning Prayer using the usual Zoom codes. Sunday services will be filmed in alternative churches and posted on the website. For those of you who join via Zoom the ID is 674 532 3083, passcode AMCHURCH. Bishop Pete has been informed and is fully supportive of our decision which we will monitor and review over the coming weeks.

I am very grateful for the support of our wardens and the enormous amount of time they have committed this past year, especially in enabling us to have the technology to broadcast services etc. I’m sure it’s not what they expected when they became wardens!

Pat Jackson and the Trio team are hoping to publish an Easter edition of Trio, taking into consideration the present climate it may be a slightly smaller issue but I am sure it will be of the same high quality as always, I know you appreciate the care and effort that goes into each publication.

Unbelievably Lent begins next month, 17th February, with Ash Wednesday. We are looking at various options for a Lent course and the best way to deliver it, more details will be in a future newsletter.”

Chris Wrigley wrote to us on behalf of the Grace Foodbank: “2020 was a difficult year for everyone but throughout, week by week, your generosity towards others has shone through. This has been so evident at the Grace Foodbank where donations never ceased to flow in. The recipients of your gifts will never know you, only your kindness. Thank you so much for your donations, the light in the darkness. All involved in the Foodbank would like to wish you a brighter, healthier 2021 and every Blessing in this new year.”

With our good wishes for 2021,
Peter and Angie

Midnight Mass St John's 2020

Hearing the old story

Each year we hear again the ancient Christmas story. Each year we retell the astonishing entrance that God made into our broken world and we are moved by God's capacity to surprise us with love. Something new had happened; something original and fresh had been revealed; nothing would ever be quite the same again. God made the choice to break the silence of ages, to give himself away in a Word. The most important Word that God has ever spoken took flesh in the womb of a young maiden, and like all flesh was born as a fragile bundle of new life.

The mystery of God was concentrated in a child; the hope of God's love was fastened on to this little one. God was choosing to visit his people – not through the dreams and words of the prophets, but in human flesh. The God who lived in the highest heavens chose another address: he decided to pitch his tent among us.

The Christmas story we hear each year is the same, but we are different. Our world is different. Our memories have grown, our hopes have been tested, our love has been called on in new ways. But no matter what changes we have undergone, what losses we have mourned, the Christmas story speaks to us again of new birth and the possibility of our own rebirth. It tells us that things can be different; it gives substance to our hope that new life is possible because of the birth of the Son of God.

The gift of life

The birth of every child is a gift of life. God's original blessing is the gift of life: in a baby we can see the blessing of God. A child who did not request life receives the gift of beginning, grows to crave for life, fight for life, struggle to preserve life. To be born is to be gifted by a God who is Life itself, and that is why reverence for human life is reverence for the God of life.

The birth of every child is a small protest against the tired view that there is nothing new under the sun, that we are condemned to a future which only repeats the stupidities of the past. And the birth of Jesus is God's protest against letting things be, abandoning people to their own devices, leaving people to fall back on the poverty of their own resources. Jesus is the help of God among us; he is the one Word on God's telegram of hope.

No one knows what any child will turn out to be. But by the time the Gospel is written, long after Jesus' mission has been completed, the Christian community can celebrate the true identity of Jesus. That is why Luke can begin his Gospel with the celebration of the birth of *the Messiah*. Luke knows who this child has turned out to be, so there is no obscurity about the birth story. He dates back in time what the Christian community has come to recognise in the power of the Spirit: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the gift of God's own life.

The gift that is given for us.

It is difficult to imagine the celebration of Christmas without the help of Luke's Gospel. It is the artist Luke who puts us in touch with the young virgin with child, Joseph her husband, the surprised shepherds, the jubilant angels announcing the good news. We are drawn into a drama that is larger than our own; we are invited to

share the mood of joy and hope; we are asked to take our own place in the dark of the manger and behold the gift of God, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Luke's invitation, which has been extended to all believers down the centuries, reaches us again tonight: to come and worship, to see for ourselves the fragility of God, the littleness of the mighty one, the sheer tenderness of a love that is offered to all peoples.

With the birth of this child a new adventure in faith begins. A new approach to God is opened up for us, a new way of relating to each other is asked of us. Because this child becomes for all of us the Way, the Truth and the Life.

That is why we make the journey back to Bethlehem each year: to rediscover our own roots in the gift of Jesus. For us, it is a journey home. As G.K. Chesterton wrote:

To an open house in the evening,
home shall men come,
to an older place than Eden,
and a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
to the place where God was homeless
and all men are at home.

Christmas Day 2020 9.30 am at St. John's

Readings - Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Gospel Luke 2:1-14[15-20]

This year, I bought an Alternative Advent Calendar from the Embrace the Middle East charity, which we supported in 2018 in our Lent Appeal. Examples of 'gifts' that I have given by buying this calendar and supporting projects in the Middle East that care for refugees include washing up liquid, baby milk, nappies, peanut butter, rice, cooking oil ...

I found it moving opening the windows each day and finding that the 'gift' is something very mundane and practical – the essentials for everyday life. I found it made a connection – realising that we all do the same things – daily practicalities for life and health

On today's window, 25th December, I wondered what 'gift' I would find, and tried to guess. In fact, it was a 'Thank You' message from the charity – so receiving thanks is part of giving too.

This has caused me to reflect on gifts, and the effect Covid has had on what we value. Perhaps on this year's Christmas present list, we might have things like:

Hugs; time with family - especially if in a care home, or sick in hospital; Fresh air; walking and enjoying the natural world; good health ... You may have your own additions to the list.

I think Covid has also had an effect on what we give. This includes the many self-giving acts by people for each other in this parish:

Practical help – shopping, collecting prescriptions; Phoning and keeping in touch; Sending cards or letters...

All of these things are different ways of showing LOVE. In any of our acts of giving or receiving – whether tangible gifts or giving our time in helping each other and keeping in touch with them – it is all about *loving* each other.

Although we can't sing hymns together, it is still meaningful to read the words ... and perhaps notice them more? Words from two relevant hymns come to mind on this Christmas day as we think about love - both by Christina Rossetti, as it happens:

Love came down at Christmas

... love was born at Christmas, Star and angels gave the sign.

Jesus is God's great gift to humanity, God's great act of love for us.

So what can our response be? Here are words from another hymn - **In the bleak mid winter:**

What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb;

If I were a wise man I would do my part, Yet, what I can I give him, give my heart

This is the best response to the great gift of love that we celebrate today. In the coming days, perhaps we can ponder what 'giving my heart' means in practice for us.