

THE MUSTARD SEED

The Parish magazine of the church of St James, Brownhills

A Family Following Jesus

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December 2023

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God's love with words and actions*



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Advent – a time for eager expectation!



Isaiah 61: 2 - The spirit sets them that serve in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified.

We've just started Advent but what is this season truly for? Advent is fast becoming the “forgotten” season in our Calendar; for absolutely ages the shops have been full of decorations to attract our eye, we hear the sound of tinkling bells and merry carols, and even the scent of spices and pine tempts our nostrils as we pass through these precious few weeks before Christmas Season starts.

Yet Advent is not a time for looking forward to a little child in Bethlehem, so much as a time to wait ***in expectation for the coming of Jesus Christ, who leads us into our future.*** Advent calls us to consider who we are as Christians and how we hear the voices of ancient prophecy.

The prophet of this season *par excellence* is Isaiah. The C of E provides us, at the beginning of a new liturgical year, with a rich selection from this book of the Old Testament. Through it, we can experience

the longing and the expectation of the generations of peoples who pray and hope for salvation and for freedom from slavery of one kind or another that continues to oppress the innocent, the poor and the downtrodden.

The preparation for this season that we've had, incidentally, as part of our JSP programme, has been striking: on the last Sunday we heard all about God's heart for the poor and for social justice to be meted out for all who are oppressed whether they be neighbour or foreigner. Also, our Lord Jesus reminds us to place all our trust in Father God, and not to become hostages of the fear that "false" prophets use to manipulate us for their own profit.

What we've started appreciating on Advent Sunday, today, is that Sunday by Sunday during Advent, the prophetic voice of Micah and Isaiah speak directly to us with surprising and ever-contemporary force. Isaiah, in particular, reminds us that we must be in right relationship with God, particularly in times of distress. He prays "Lord, you are our Father; we the clay, you the power, we are all the work of your hands" (64:7) and we realise our utter dependence on God's help.

Isaiah was speaking at a time when the people were not following the ways of the Covenant. His words are also contemporary: the coming of the Messiah will be a time, not simply for salvation, but also for judgement: what are we proud of as a civilisation, and is there need for repentance? A question for us to reflect on prayerfully, and humility before the Lord this Advent is: can we stand before our risen Lord when he comes in glory and say that we have been good and faithful servants?

During this time of economic uncertainty and real hardship for so many people, the words of Isaiah continue to encourage us with their promise of hope. "'Console my people, console them' says your God", (40:1) proclaims the Prophet. The scriptures for the Second Sunday in Advent echo this theme of reassurance in difficult times. "The Lord will make us prosper and our earth shall yield its fruit. Justice shall march before him and peace shall follow his steps. (Psalm 84).

As we move further into Advent the voice of Isaiah continues to call to us, with his vision of a promise yet to be fulfilled, his words of comfort and hope yet to be realised fully. For Christians it is Christ who "brings

good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to those in prison.” (Isaiah 61:1-2) The kingdom we long for needs each one of us to hear this good news, to have our own hearts healed. We need truly to hear the voice of truth and to proclaim it. As Christ heals us, so he also sends us out to complete the mission he gave to his disciples. The child born in Bethlehem enters a world still very much in need of its saviour.

Our Emmanuel, you see, is to be the fulfilment of the hopes and dreams of generations. Isaiah prophesied that “the maiden is with child” (20th December) to emphasise that no matter how terrible and fearful the situation, God would not abandon the people. As we continue to hope and pray for the glory of the Kingdom of Christ, we dream with the prophet during Advent for the grace of lasting peace and unending love.

With love and many prayers for a thoughtful, prayerful and heartfelt Advent for us all,



Rev'd Gayle

Bits & Pieces from past Decembers

250 years ago, on 16th December 1773 that the Boston Tea Party took place in Massachusetts. American patriots boarded ships and threw chests of tea belonging to the British East India Company into Boston Harbour, as a protest against the British tax on tea.

200 years ago, on 23rd December 1823 that the poem *The Night Before Christmas* was first published (anonymously) in the Sentinel newspapers in Troy, New York. It was written by Clement Clarke Moore.

175 years ago on 19th December 1848 that Emily Bronte, British novelist and poet, died of tuberculosis, aged 30. Best known for her only novel, *Wuthering Heights*.

The Heart of Christmas

We're at that time of year again! But is Christmas just about the shopping, tree or presents? At its heart, Christmas is all about a God who has showed up on earth. The Creator of the universe, whose hands flung stars into space, cared enough to come to earth as a tiny baby. *'The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.'* (John 1:14)

Every year we sing carols and retell the same story of the donkey, inn-keeper, stable, angels, shepherds, star, wise men, gifts and Mary and Joseph with baby! Why do we do all this? It's to remind us that God deals with the mess of our world by sending His Son to die in our place. This makes it possible for us to have a relationship with Himself:

When the time came, He *"did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!"* (Philippians 2:6-8)

Reflecting on Jesus in the manger is a great place to start understanding the heart of the Christmas message. However, it's so much more than simply a cute baby lying in the bed of straw:

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator;

If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist;

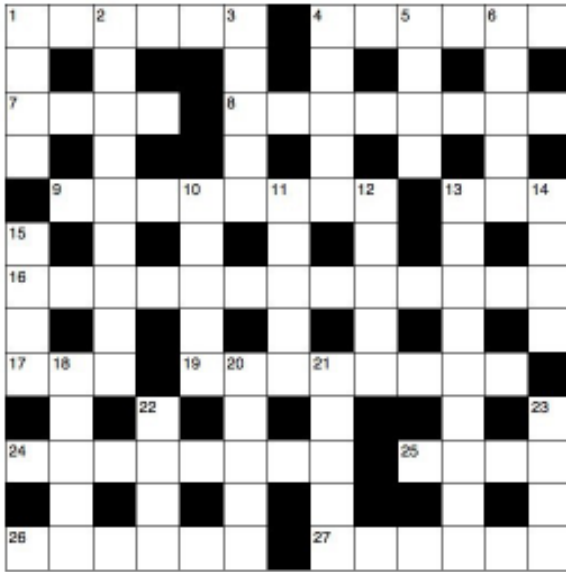
If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist;

If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer;

But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Saviour.

Christ veiled His deity, but He did not void it. - Anon

December



Crossword

Across

- 1 Rely (Psalm 62:7) (6)
- 4 'He stretches out the heavens like a – , and spreads them out like a tent to live in' (Isaiah 40:22) (6)
- 7 What the dove carried the olive leaf in, when it returned to Noah's ark (Genesis 8:11) (4)
- 8 Annoy (1 Samuel 1:6) (8)
- 9 Judah's last king, who ended his days as a blind prisoner in Babylon (Jeremiah 52:11) (8)
- 13 'They all – and were satisfied' (Luke 9:17) (3)
- 16 Eliphaz the Temanite was one; so was Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite (Job 2:11; 16:2) (4,9)
- 17 National Association of Evangelicals (of the USA) (1,1,1)
- 19 Popular song for New Year's Eve, Auld (4,4)
- 24 Able dock (anag.) (8)
- 25 The number of stones David chose for his confrontation with Goliath (1 Samuel 17:40) (4)
- 26 Elgar's best-known 'Variations' (6)
- 27 Soak (Isaiah 16:9) (6)

Down

- 1 Money owing (Deuteronomy 15:3) (4)
- 2 Conciliatory (Titus 3:2) (9)
- 3 'Do this, whenever you – it, in remembrance of me' (1 Corinthians 11:25) (5)
- 4 A group assisting in the governance of the Roman Catholic Church (5)
- 5 One of the gifts Joseph's brothers took with them on their second journey to Egypt (Genesis 43:11) (4)
- 6 'Reach out your hand and – – into my side. Stop doubting and believe' (John 20:27) (3,2)
- 10 Be outstandingly good (2 Corinthians 8:7) (5)
- 11 'What – – that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?' (Psalm 8:4) (2,3)
- 12 Horse's feet (Judges 5:22) (5)
- 13 Notice (Deuteronomy 17:4) (9)
- 14 Comes between 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah (4)
- 15 One of Israel's northern towns conquered by Ben-Hadad (1 Kings 15:20) (4)
- 18 Narnia's Lion (5)
- 20 One of the two rivers in which Naaman would have preferred to wash (2 Kings 5:12) (5)
- 21 Avarice – one of the evils that come from inside people (Mark 7:22) (5)
- 22 Knight Grand Cross of St Michael and St George (1,1,1,1)
- 23 Jacob's first wife (Genesis 29:23) (4)

The first-ever nativity scene

This Christmas, thousands of Nativity plays will be held around the UK. Ever wonder who staged the very first one?

It was St Francis of Assisi, and it was 800 years ago, in Greccio, Italy, on 25th December 1223.

Francis had been born into a wealthy family, but abandoned his noble inheritance when he became a Christian. Instead, he had turned to a life of great simplicity, in service to Christ's church.

Francis spent many hours meditating on the stories of the life of Christ, and even travelled to the Holy Land in 1219 and 1220, to see the various holy sites of Jesus's life. The sites deeply moved him, as they brought the Bible stories to vibrant life.

Back in Italy, in November of 1223, Francis was in Rome, and he had an idea. Why not share something of the inspiration of the Holy Land with his people here in Italy?

Barely 50 miles to the north, in Greccio, he knew many people to whom he had been ministering for years. He could at least show them something of the simplicity of the birth of Jesus. And so it was that, two weeks before Christmas, Francis asked his friend, the Lord of Greccio, Giovanni Velita, to prepare a nearby cave with live animals and a hay-filled manger.

That cave, beside some rocky crags, became the venue of the very first ever Nativity scene. On Christmas 1223, when the people of Greccio attended Christmas Mass as usual, they were invited to 'come and see' the simple scene.

According to his biographer, Brother Thomas of Celano, Francis wanted people to see what Jesus had "suffered for lack of the necessities of a new-born babe, and how He lay in the manger between the ox and ass."

According to eyewitness accounts of the moment, fires lit the dark scene while crowds arrived at the spot carrying candles and torches. There were also accounts of miracles happening that night. Some people had a vision of a real infant in the empty manger, and others reported miraculous healings.

All in all, the Nativity scene was an instant success, and soon other communities were staging their own.

Today, you can still visit the cave and rocks where the first Nativity was staged. It is now a Franciscan hermitage and sanctuary. Every year at Christmas, the people of Greccio stage a live, historical re-enactment of St Francis and the first Nativity scene.

Upcoming Events

Dates for things that are happening soon:

6th December – Beer & Carols at Jack ‘Jigger’ Taylor at 7.45pm
(previously HSBC Bank)

9th December – Cookies with Santa in church hall at 1pm

10th December – Christingle Service at 4.30pm

15th December – Family Film Night at 6pm

16th December – Table Top Sale in church hall from 1pm

17th December – Carols by Candlelight at 6.15pm

17th December – Film Night for Connection Point after Carols
by Candlelight service

20th December – Blue Christmas at 7.30pm

24th December – All-age Nativity Service at 4.30pm

24th December – Midnight Holy Communion at 11.30pm

25th December – Holy Communion at 8am

25th December – All-age Holy Communion at 10am

31st December – Holy Communion for Christmas season at 10am

31st December – Celebration Service for the Eve of the New Year
at 6.15pm

31st December – New Year’s Party at 7.45pm

Historically, the Church of England has had its share of eccentric clergy. Even nowadays, hiding away in remote parishes, there are still some colourful clergy about. Clergy such as the elderly, Anglo-Catholic Uncle Eustace, who is incumbent in the small parish of St James-the-Least-of-All, somewhere in Very Rural England. Eustace despairs of his nephew, Darren, who has become an Evangelical curate in a busy urban parish... and so he writes letters, to try and properly 'educate' Darren in parish life.

On how to make the most of carol singing

The Rectory
St. James the Least

My dear Nephew Darren

Carol singing is not what it used to be. My fond memories of a group of choristers, muffled in scarves and overcoats, carrying lanterns, and walking from door to door in the snow, as they sang 'While shepherds watched ...' had to be suddenly revised when I saw your own music group, in T-shirts inscribed with 'Jesus loves You', singing 'Little donkey', in your shopping centre. I suspect any money you raised would just about have paid for the electricity used to power your banks of electronic equipment. Singing in the main square of the Centre next to the fountain may have looked good, but it seemed to mean that the choir men were obliged to make constant trips to the lavatory.

Here at St James the Least of All, carol singing is regarded as a staff perk for the choir; the year when the Boys' Brigade tried to break their monopoly was suppressed with a ruthlessness that would have impressed Genghis Kahn.

Our annual carol-singing route involves months of meticulous planning. We find that a transparent collection box is vital, so that donors can see what earlier patrons have given. This means that those who are bound to put in notes must be visited first ‘pour encourager les autres’.

It also needs a detachable base, so that if coppers are given, they can be removed from sight before the next call.

Those homes that contain several children are visited just after bedtime, so that parents will give generously simply to get the choir to go somewhere else. Veiled threats to stay and sing more carols (unless they give generously) are usually very effective. Getting whoever looks the most innocent and photogenic to ring the bell and ask for money is a far more subtle way of ensuring a donation than planting any number of mafia lookalikes (such as our church treasurer) on the doorstep.

The choir always finishes its evening at the local pub but again, the timing must be carefully managed. Too early and there will only be the landlord, his wife, and their Labrador to listen; too late and people will be so full of Christmas cheer that any carols will be hi-jacked and become the equivalent of back-of-the bus rugby songs.

Your loving uncle,

Eustace

Always remember . . .

*There are no strangers in our church –
just friends you haven't met yet.*

Nativity Quiz in 20 Questions

1. Where did Mary and Joseph live before Jesus was born?
a) Nazareth b) Bethlehem c) Jerusalem
2. What was the name of the angel who told Mary she would have a child?
3. What did Joseph do for a living?
4. Who was the Roman ruler when Jesus was born?
5. Why did Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem?
6. How did Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem?
7. Why couldn't Mary and Joseph find a place to stay?
8. Where does the Bible say Jesus was born?
a) In a stable b) In hay c) In a manger
9. According to the Bible, which animals were specifically mentioned as being present in the stable when Jesus was born?
a) sheep and a donkey b) cattle and a donkey c) donkey, sheep and cattle d) None
10. What does the angel say to the shepherds when they tell them to go to Bethlehem?
11. The wise men travelled to Jerusalem. a) northward b) southward c) eastward d) westward
12. What did the Wise Men follow to find Jesus?
13. How many Wise Men visited baby Jesus?
14. What gifts did the wise men bring for Jesus?
15. Who spread the news about baby Jesus throughout Bethlehem?
16. What is the City of David also known as in the bible?
17. Which of the gospels tell the story of the Nativity?
18. What does Jesus' other name, "Immanuel", mean? a) God with us b) Son of God c) He who is God d) Chosen One
19. How many days after the birth of Christ did Joseph and Mary give him the name Jesus?
20. Jesus was born on the 25th of December. True or false?

1. Nazareth; 2. Gabriel; 3. Carpenter; 4. Caesar Augustus; 5. To register for the census; 6. We are not told in the Bible; 7. There was no room at the inn; 8. c) In a manger; 9. d) None; 10. 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to all people'; 11. d) westward; 12. A star; 13. The Bible doesn't say; 14. Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh; 15. The shepherds; 16. Bethlehem; 17. Matthew and Luke; 18. a) God with us; 19. 8; according to the law; 20. False; we don't know the date.

NATIVITY QUIZ ANSWERS:

May we, a family following
Jesus at St James
wish everyone who reads
this magazine

**A Very Happy and
Holy Christmas**

and a

**New Year filled with
the Light of Christ**

Readings for December

The readings are the ones we will use in church and online.

3rd December 2023 – Morning Service -
Micah 6 v 8 & Luke 4 v 16–20

3rd December 2023 – Evening Service -
Isaiah 64 v 1–9 & Mark 13 v 24–37

10th December 2023 – Morning Service -
Isaiah 61 v 1–9 & Luke 4 v 14–21

10th December 2023 – Evening Service -
Isaiah 9 v 2–7

17th December 2023 – Morning Service -
Psalm 126 & John 1 v 6–8, 19–28

17th December 2023 – Evening Service -
Various

20th December 2023 – Evening Service -
Isaiah 40 v 1, 25–31 & John 1 v 1_18

24th December 2023 – Midnight Service -
Romans 16 v 25–27 & Luke 1 v 26–38

31st December 2023 – Morning Service -
Isaiah 61 v 10– ch62 v 3 & Luke 2 v 15–21

31st December 2023 – Evening Service -
Isaiah 63 v 7–9 & Galatians 4 v 4–7

Preparations

Christmas is a time for making plans. Presents to buy, cards to send, decorations to put up, food to order, travel arrangements to make... the list goes on and on. But whether our plans are ambitious or simple this Christmas, we still dread anything going wrong.

Yet plans seemed to fall apart that first Christmas. Mary and Joseph had planned to marry and set up home together in Galilee. Then Mary had become unexpectedly pregnant, and they were summoned to Bethlehem for the census. So instead of a comfortable Galilean home amongst family, they were suddenly parents, all alone in a place fit for animals!

The shepherds had expected another routine night on the hills of Bethlehem. But the angel's message and a heavenly choir changed everything, and they went to search for the Christ-child instead. Their change of plans brought them great joy!

The Eastern men had expected to find the 'King of the Jews' in a royal palace. But the star by-passed Jerusalem and took them to Bethlehem. Then their plans changed again, when they were warned in a dream to avoid Herod, and slip home another way.

The Holy Couple then had another upset of plans: Joseph was warned in a dream NOT to go home to Galilee, but to flee for safety in Egypt instead.

At first sight, all these changes display a chaotic mix of circumstances. But behind it all, God was working out His divine purposes. When Jesus was born, all the Old Testament prophecies of His coming were fulfilled. Nothing happened by chance. Into a messy world God brought to us His Son, to be our Saviour.

We worship a great and loving God who not only planned that first Christmas but is also preparing for our stay in His eternal home.

The plans God makes are wise, and they always succeed! (Isaiah 28:29)

Christ became what we are that He might make us what He is. - Athanasius

No Room? On the Contrary

This year one carol will be sung with particular poignancy. It retells the message of angels, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favour rests" and continues:

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife,
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel strain have rolled,
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love song which they bring:
O hush the noise, you men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.*

The angels' goodwill message will persist despite our clamour, for it proclaims God's all-embracing and eternal welcome. Heaven's doors are ever open: it is home for everyone. The final biblical vision is of an all-encompassing city: "*On no day will its gates ever be shut... the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it.*"

Jesus, for whom there had been no room at the inn, taught that God's kingdom is home for every race: "*I say to you that many will come from the East and the West, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.*" He reassured those anxious about the future: "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms...*"

No room? **Don't you believe it!**

*Constant kindness can accomplish much. As the sun makes ice melt, kindness causes misunderstanding, mistrust and hostility to evaporate. -
Albert Schweitzer*

Prayers & Poems

Everyday Christmas

(Mal 4:2, Mt 1:23)

Light a candle,
Look into the light,
Pray.

*Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings*

As the flame rises,
Smooth, bright,
Know the comfort of Christ
In the carol speaking
Afresh.
Bringing Jesus
Into heart and prayer.

Emmanuel, God with us.
Light of the world,
Out of the stable
Into our situations.

Because of Jesus
Christmas is everyday.

The Lord is here.
Hallelujah.

By Daphne Kitching

Babies do that to you

After the lights and the kisses,
the visits and the visitors,
the presents and the promises,
only a Baby remains;
and parents who have never
been this way before.

After the dreams and the whispers,
the angels and the merrymakers,
comes the silence;
comes crying in the night,
a long, interrupted journey,
along a strange path.

Things will never be
as they were before

Babies do that to you;
Jesus does that to you.
But He comes with you all the way,
carrying love in His tiny hand,
holding heaven in His heart.

By Tim Lenton

Places of Welcome

Place of Welcome is an open invitation to come and join us for a cup of tea or coffee and a friendly chat every Tuesday morning. You are equally welcome if you just want to spend a few moments of quiet in church alone.

We also have our Knit & Natter group at the same time – 10-12 noon every Tuesday.

Life Groups

There are now five Life Groups which are meeting on a regular basis. It would be good to think we could increase the number meeting, so if you would like to be involved, please speak to Revd Gayle in the first instance.

Telephone Prayer

If you would like any prayer ministry via the telephone, please contact Gayle on 07545 657 636, or Liz Corbett on 01543 370162.

Magazine Articles

If, in your reading, you find an article that you think bears repeating in the parish magazine, please let us know and we will try our best to include it in a future issue.

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