



December 2017  
& January 2018

Issue 52

# Witney Congregational Church

## R CROSS A D S

*Witney Congregational Church is a crossroads where we:*

*meet God in worship*

*meet one another in friendship*

*meet our community and world with the love of Jesus*



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# WHAT'S ON GUIDE

Witney Congregational Church offer a whole range of activities through which we seek to Worship, Work and Witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in this community today.

Further information can be obtained from the Church Administrator, Minister, Church Secretary or the leaders of the particular activities who are listed at the back of this magazine.

## WORSHIP

|                 |          |                                       |                                  |
|-----------------|----------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Daily Worship   | 9.30 am  | Mon-Fri                               | Short time of Prayer and Reading |
| Saturday Praise | 11.00 am | 1 <sup>st</sup> Saturday of the month |                                  |
| Sunday Services | 10.30 am |                                       |                                  |
|                 | 6.00 pm  | 1 <sup>st</sup> Sunday of the month   |                                  |

Communion is held twice during the month at the first Sunday evening and third Sunday morning services

## PRAYER

The Church is open each morning for Prayer

## STUDY & FELLOWSHIP

|          |         |   |
|----------|---------|---|
| Tuesday  | 12.15pm | Lite Bite piece of the Word (1 <sup>st</sup> Tuesday of each month) |
| Thursday | 7.30pm  | Bible Study (see Sunday Link)                                       |

## YOUTH ACTIVITIES

|        |          |  |
|--------|----------|--|
| Sunday | 10.30 am | Crèche, Noah's Ark & The K.I.C.K. on Sundays                 |
| Monday | 10.00 am | Noah's Ark – Infant Group for babies and pre-school children |

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

|          |            |                         |
|----------|------------|-------------------------|
| Sunday   | Bi-Monthly | Church Meeting          |
| Tuesday  | Monthly    | Deacon's Meeting        |
| Thursday | 10.00am    | Thursday Coffee Morning |
| Saturday | 10.30 am   | Coffee Morning          |

## SUNDAY LINK

Weekly bulletin for all Christians providing stimulating thought along with news and notices concerning our Church

## WITNEY ECUMENICAL YOUTH TRUST (BASE 33)

4 Welch Way (Entrance – High Street) ☎ 01993 774402

## St ANDREW'S BOOKSHOP

Opening Hours: Monday – Saturday ☎ 01993 709429  
09.00 am – 5.00 pm

## CHURCH WEBSITE

For further information, please visit our website:

[www.witneycongregational.org.uk](http://www.witneycongregational.org.uk)



I have repeated it many times before; but It is the same old frustrating and annoying story! As always, and ever-increasingly so for some considerable time now, the shops have had their goods on offer, and, as has become accepted as normal, we are all subjected to the increased commercial hype putting pressure on us to decide what ultimately we ought to buy. **However, amongst all this activity, and commercial hype, let us focus on Advent and the birth of Christ.**



Turning now to those who have contributed to this edition; alongside the standard pages, Canon David Winter reflects on and then there were shepherds ....; The Ven John Barton meditates on The miracle of Christmas Day; there is the continuation of Ken Lee's Bible Study series first contributed to the magazine in 1999, and there is the 2<sup>nd</sup> in a series of 5 Sermons from Jason Boyd to name but a few.

Many thanks for those who have contributed for this edition, but would

encourage anyone to consider submitting article(s) for the next edition by either:

E-mail:

terrypowlesland@uwclub.net

jacquipowlesland@uwclub.net

or, just plainly written on paper, which can be typed up.

The next 2-monthly edition, covering February & March 2018, is due on **Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> February**

Your Editor



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16. Refugees



### Daily Prayer Time:

Mon-Fri 9.30 am

### Services

10.30 am weekly & 6.00pm on first Sunday of the month and will normally be led by Rev Dr Jason Boyd unless advised below

### Dec

|                  |         |  |           |
|------------------|---------|--|-----------|
| 3 <sup>rd</sup>  | am      | Morning Worship  |           |
|                  | 6.30pm  | WICS Christmas Concert                                   |           |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> | am      | Morning Worship  | Communion |
| 17 <sup>th</sup> | am      | Nativity Morning Worship                                 |           |
|                  | 6.00pm  | Lessons & Carols by Candlelight                          |           |
| 24 <sup>th</sup> | am      | All-Age Morning Worship                                  |           |
|                  | 11.15pm | Midnight Service with Communion at Congregational Church |           |
| 25 <sup>th</sup> | am      | All-Age Worship – Sharing Gifts                          | Communion |
| 31 <sup>st</sup> | am      | All-Age Morning Worship                                  |           |
|                  | pm      | Madley Park Residential Home                             | 3.00pm    |

### Jan

|                  |    |                 |           |
|------------------|----|-----------------|-----------|
| 6 <sup>th</sup>  |    | Saturday Praise | 11.00am   |
| 7 <sup>th</sup>  | am | Morning Worship |           |
|                  | pm | Evening Worship | Communion |
| 14 <sup>th</sup> | am | Morning Worship |           |
| 21 <sup>st</sup> | am | Morning Worship | Communion |
| 28 <sup>th</sup> | am | tba             |           |

### Feb

|                 |    |                 |           |
|-----------------|----|-----------------|-----------|
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> |    | Saturday Praise | 11.00am   |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> | am | Morning Worship |           |
|                 | pm | Evening Worship | Communion |

The following events are given for your particular attention:

### Dec

|                  |  |                  |                    |
|------------------|--|------------------|--------------------|
| 5 <sup>th</sup>  | Lite Bite piece of the Word                          | 12.15pm          |                    |
|                  | Deacons Meeting                                      | 7.30pm           |                    |
| 9 <sup>th</sup>  | Prayer Chain meeting                                 | 9.15am           |                    |
|                  | CTiW Carol Singing starting at Congregational Church |                  | 10.00am            |
| 12 <sup>th</sup> | Springfield School Christmas Assembly                | 10.30am          |                    |
|                  | Tower Hill School Concert                            | 5.30pm           |                    |
| 14 <sup>th</sup> | Advent Quiet Day                                     | 10.00am – 4.00pm |                    |
| 21 <sup>st</sup> | Thursday Morning Coffee Christmas Special            |                  | 10.00am- 12.00noon |

### Jan

|                                     |                                    |           |  |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------|--|
| 9 <sup>th</sup>                     | Lite Bite piece of the Word        | 12.15pm   |  |
|                                     | Deacons Meeting                    | 7.30pm    |  |
| 13 <sup>th</sup>                    | Prayer Chain meeting               | 9.15am    |  |
| 18 <sup>th</sup> – 25 <sup>th</sup> | Week of Prayer for Christian Unity |           |  |
| 26 <sup>th</sup>                    | WWDofPrayer Preparation meeting    | 10.30am   |  |
| 28 <sup>th</sup>                    | Church Meeting                     | 12.00noon |  |

**Feb**

6<sup>th</sup>

Lite Bite piece of the Word  
Deacons Meeting

12.15pm  
7.30pm

**Note:** It is the intention to continue the God of Surprises Bible Study and any date(s) will be published on the Sunday Link

## ROTAS

### WELCOMING TEAM

|            |    |                                |
|------------|----|--------------------------------|
| <b>Dec</b> | 03 | Cecily Lau & Lesley Barter     |
|            | 10 | Lesley Barter & Nanna Blackman |
|            | 17 | Susan Wass & Joan Currie       |
|            | 24 | tba                            |
|            | 25 | Judi Holloway                  |
|            | 31 | Viviane Boyd & Susan Wass      |
| <b>Jan</b> | 07 | Lesley Barter & Jo Matthews    |
|            | 14 | Beryl & Pip Cartwright         |
|            | 21 | Irene St Clair & Lesley Barter |
|            | 28 | Cecily Lau & Nanna Blackman    |
| <b>Feb</b> | 04 | Cecily Lau & Judi Holloway     |



### COMMUNION

|            |       |                                   |                  |
|------------|-------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Dec</b> | 10 am | Judi Holloway & Lesley Barter     |                  |
|            |       | Beryl Cartwright & Viviane Boyd   |                  |
|            |       | Preparation                       | Lesley Barter    |
|            | 25 am | Viviane Boyd & Judi Holloway      |                  |
| <b>Jan</b> |       | Preparation                       | Viviane Boyd     |
|            | 07 pm | Lesley Barter                     |                  |
|            |       | Preparation                       | Lesley Barter    |
|            | 21 am | Beryl Cartwright & Norline Martin |                  |
| <b>Feb</b> |       | Cecily Lau & Lesley Barter        |                  |
|            |       | Preparation                       | Beryl Cartwright |
|            | 04 pm | Lesley Barter                     |                  |
|            |       | Preparation                       | Lesley Barter    |



### FLOWERS

|            |    |                  |
|------------|----|------------------|
| <b>Dec</b> | 03 | Val Obriain      |
|            | 10 | Christmas Tree   |
|            | 17 | Christmas Tree   |
|            | 24 | Christmas Tree   |
|            | 31 | Christmas Tree   |
| <b>Jan</b> | 07 | Beryl Cartwright |
|            | 14 | Judi Holloway    |
|            | 21 | Sonja Boyd       |
|            | 28 | Joan Currie      |
| <b>Feb</b> | 04 | Rita Hayes       |



## SUNDAY COFFEE

|            |    |                               |
|------------|----|-------------------------------|
| <b>Dec</b> | 03 | Viviane Boyd & Hilary Pratley |
|            | 10 | Claire Woodward & Susan Wass  |
|            | 17 | Sue Birdseye & Irene St Clair |
|            | 24 | Susan Wass & Judith Bungey    |
|            | 31 | Viviane Boyd & Hilary Pratley |
| <b>Jan</b> | 07 | Claire Woodward & Susan Wass  |
|            | 14 | Sue Birdseye & Irene St Clair |
|            | 21 | Susan Wass & Judith Bungey    |
|            | 28 | Viviane Boyd & Hilary Pratley |
| <b>Feb</b> | 04 | Claire Woodward & Susan Wass  |



## THURSDAY COFFEE

|            |    |   |
|------------|----|---|
| <b>Dec</b> | 07 | Hilary Pratley  |
|            | 14 | No Coffee due to Advent Quiet Day                     |
|            | 21 | Coffee, Mince Pies and Christmas Carols – All helpers |
|            | 28 | No Coffee – Church closed                             |
| <b>Jan</b> | 04 | Beryl Cartwright                                      |
|            | 11 | Hilary Pratley  |
|            | 18 | Beryl Cartwright                                      |
|            | 25 | Hilary Pratley  |
| <b>Feb</b> | 01 | Beryl Cartwright                                      |



We would be extremely grateful for other people to joint he Thursday Coffee Rota

Every effort has been made to meet individual circumstances. However, please change with someone else if the dates are not convenient for you

|            |    |                    |
|------------|----|--------------------|
| <b>Dec</b> | 04 | Charlotte Hayes    |
|            | 06 | Sue Birdseye       |
|            | 07 | Charlotte Hathaway |
|            | 09 | Audrey Elliot      |
|            | 16 | Layla Holloway     |
|            | 25 | Preston Holloway   |
|            |    | Kathy Shaw         |
|            | 29 | Cecily Lau         |
|            | 30 | Jan Schunselaar    |



|            |    |                |
|------------|----|----------------|
| <b>Jan</b> | 02 | Benjamin Esapa |
|            |    | Joseph Esapa   |
|            |    | Margaret Esapa |
|            |    | Gwen Mee       |
|            | 04 | Tori St Clair  |
|            | 07 | Brian Bennett  |
|            |    | Storm Wallace  |
|            | 24 | David Kinchin  |

**Feb** 04 Elaine Beechey

## THANK YOU!

I would like to thank everyone for their prayers, kindness and support while I was away for a kidney transplant. I feel so much better and appreciate your concern. Thank you also to the people who covered my job in my absence. It was much appreciated.

Best wishes  
Sue Birdseye

## Why Bethlehem?

A minister asked his Bible class: 'Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem?'

A student replied, 'Because his mother was there.'

*Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and a*





## Pastor's Papers

A coffee bar, a vision for the youth of Witney, a generous start-up grant of £25,000 from the Council for World Mission, and the working together of Congregationalists, Methodists and Anglicans, gave birth to Base 33 Ecumenical Youth Trust. It began in 1998 with a single youth worker and grew in confidence and impact over time. I know people who belonged to the Base family who tell me what a difference it made to their lives. They're in employment and succeeding in ways they couldn't have imagined.

Sadly, today Base 33 has closed. It is the 30 November 2017. It has been a long and difficult two weeks for the Trustees. We have issued this statement:

*It is with great regret that I am writing to you as Chair of Trustees to inform you of the closure of Base 33 Youth Charity based at 33 High Street, Witney.*

*Following legal advice the Charity has declared itself to be insolvent.*

*Base 33 has been part of the fabric of Witney for a significant number of years and has provided support for a large number of young people not only in Witney but throughout West Oxfordshire.*

*The Trustees would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the Charity's supporters who have been involved in fund raising and working with the Charity to deliver youth services for young people some of whom are vulnerable and required specialist help.*

*Base 33 closed its doors today and will not re-open. The staff who have shown great dedication and commitment to Base 33 and have worked tirelessly in a very difficult operating environment have been informed of the closure and are receiving support.*

*Relevant authorities, clients, commissioning bodies and partners are being informed that the charity has ceased to operate.*

Clearly, there is an enormous human cost in the decision we had to take. First, the young people no longer have a source of professional support to help them get through the challenges that they face. Second, there are the staff who've done a fantastic job and who, through no fault of their own, find themselves without employment. They have invested themselves in the young people and are deeply concerned for their wellbeing. Finally, there is a huge hole in our community. Youth and children's services have been slashed and youth charities are chasing funds that are drying up.

My heart is heavy. I am desperately sad that Base has come to an end. I want to assure you as a congregation that I have done everything within my means to ensure that all staff have been treated well in extremely difficult circumstances. I have offered ongoing support. I am also determined to ensure that young people can contact me and that I am able to signpost them to appropriate help. I would ask you to pray for everyone involved.

We are in the season of Advent, a time of preparing for Christ to come into our lives. Amidst the frenzy of the season I would urge you to make the way for Jesus to be born anew within you. Read the scripture. Pray the scripture. May your life be saturated by prayer so that out of the stillness your actions would be your gift of worship to God.

Shalom

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JASON" with a stylized flourish underneath.

## More from the minister:

### A Christmas reflection and prayer

Last year, at the 10th anniversary concert of the Witney Inter-Church Singers, they sang a setting of *In the bleak mid-winter* by Bob Chilcott. I was moved to tears as they sang:

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd I would bring  
a lamb  
If I were a wise man I would do my  
part;  
Yet what I can, I give him - give  
Him my heart.

This transported me to an experience in prayer of the crucified Jesus. I asked Jesus, "What do you want to say to me?"

I saw him dying. His mother was there with hands up-stretched. Was she giving Jesus away with a resounding 'Yes' or was her pain so deep that she was taking back her baby - her precious boy?

Jesus spoke to me in this moment of contemplation. He said, "Jason, I want everything."

"Everything?!" I cried. I thought of my family.

"Everything Jesus?! I can't. I can't let go Jesus."

I wept. Jesus was asking for my deepest loves and to give him my singular love.

And then I knew: "Jesus, I cannot give you everything. I need your help. Give me the grace to give you all the things I love."

As the music of Christmas filled my being, I wrote this prayer to share with all who had gathered to perform and to listen:

Everything.

Everything was called into being by your word:

emptiness filled  
chaos ordered  
darkness become light.

Everything seemed lost when the first woman and man grasped the fruit of wisdom:

communion broken  
harmony now discord  
paradise lost.

Everything was given when the father's heart gave his only son in love:

Word made flesh  
Spirit overshadowing  
Mary's 'Yes' hope of salvation.

Everything was given as Jesus hung on the cross:

"Father forgive them for they do  
not know what they are doing.  
My God! My God! Why have you  
abandoned me?  
Father into your hands I give my  
spirit."

Everything is asked:

Jesus you want everything  
my body  
my heart  
all I love here on earth.

Give me grace to give it all - everything to you. Amen.



The following article, written by The Ven John Barton, has been extracted from Parish pump, and provides a meditation on the sheer wonder of Christmas, and is entitled:

## The miracle of Christmas Day

Way back in Bible times, everyone believed the world was flat and the universe was in layers, above and below. Though limited in their understanding, people in those days could marvel at the immensity of the universe and their relative insignificance: one of the OT Psalms considers all this and asks God a question:

‘When I look up at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
At the moon and the stars you have set in place,  
What is a frail mortal, that you should be mindful of him,  
A human being, that you should take notice of him?’ [Ps 8:3,4]

How much more meaningful that question is today. Think of *our* appreciation of the cosmos: its staggering size and complexity. What *are* frail mortals, that God should be mindful of them, human beings, that God should take notice of them?

If questions about our origin and our place in the order of things are larger than ever, so too is our enquiry about human destiny. Where’s it all heading?

Suppose then, for one moment we could glimpse through a crack in the impenetrable veil of the unknown, to see whatever/whoever it is that controls our origin and our destiny. What would that vision do to us?

There’s a healthy reticence in the Bible about seeing God. Moses was warned that ‘no mortal may see me and live’. (Exodus 33) And in the New Testament St Paul makes clear that no one had ever seen or could ever see Him.

And yet. That is precisely what *Christmas* enables us to do. In Jesus,

we are offered God on the only terms we could understand. God in our own language. Incarnation.

It began with a baby in the arms of His mother. Sensationally surprising. The origin of the universe and its destiny – now in human form... *for our sake*. It’s the last thing we would have expected, so it’s easily missed. But here and now you and I are invited to kneel in wonder and worship, with Mary and Joseph and shepherds.

The story continued, of course. As the baby grew up, the Creator of the Cosmos placed Himself at the service of humanity, as Jesus the teacher and healer. Then it all went grim. He suffered persecution, prosecution, crucifixion. But it was still all part of God’s plan to redeem His wayward human creation.

Finally, as the Christian creed puts it, ‘On the third day He rose again...He will come again in glory, to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.’

This child is our glimpse of the beginning and the end. He is God stooping to meet us, in the lowliest of guises.

This extraordinary contrast of majesty and humility in the birth at Bethlehem was captured beautifully by a 17<sup>th</sup> century parish priest, Giles Fletcher . Here is just an extract:

*‘A child He was, and had not learnt to speak,  
That with His word ... the world before  
did make;*

*His mother's arms Him bore, He was so  
weak,  
That with one hand the vaults of heaven  
could shake.*

*See how small a room my infant Lord doth  
take,*

*Whom all the world is not enough to hold.*

*Who of His years or of His age hath told?  
Never such age so young, never a child  
so old.’*

Giles Fletcher 1586 – 1623



## PRAYER LETTER No 182

### God's Faithfulness

God Called Abraham to leave his home and go where he told him to go. God was faithful to Abraham and all his descendents throughout the centuries despite their adversities and their wanderings. God was and still is faithful to mankind. God spoke through the Prophets of the coming of the Messiah, the Son of God, the Saviour. This coming was not immediate but in the course of time, God was faithful and through the virgin Mary, God's son Jesus was born.

Galilee and Judea at the time of Jesus' birth was under Roman occupation. A decree was issued by the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus that a Census be taken of everyone in the Roman Empire. Everyone had to be registered in the town of their birth. In Joseph's case he had to travel with Mary from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. Both Joseph and Mary were descended from the 'House of David'.

We know from Matthew's Gospel that Joseph and Mary were given hospitality in Bethlehem. After Jesus was born the family stayed on making a home in Bethlehem and staying for up to two years. King Herod, the Jewish 'puppet' King, who had authority under Roman Jurisdiction, issued an edict to have all baby boys under two years old to be killed. His Kingship had been threatened by the news of a 'new born' King. What a desperate and horrifying act. Joseph and Mary had found somewhere to live and made a home in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth so this news made them anxious. God was faithful to Joseph and spoke to him in a dream. No wonder Joseph, acting on instructions from The Lord in this dream, took Mary with their toddler Jesus and fled to Egypt as refugees. We know they stayed in Egypt until it was safe to go home to Nazareth. Jesus had already experienced two moves in his young life, one forced by bloodshed and one chosen by his earthly parents.

As we hear daily in the news bulletins the plight of many thousands of refugees from many counties leaving their homes, escaping is not an easy choice. It is usually a matter of life and death, trying to escape from war torn countries, from persecution, from unfair imprisonment, from starvation. We in our safe homes and environment have no idea what these people are going through.

What comes to your mind when you hear these phrases?

'Home, sweet home; **'home is where the heart is'; 'coming home'; 'going home'** I remember many years ago watching a news bulletin when R.A.F families were being evacuated from Cyprus. A reporter asked a child from one family where his home was. The child replied, 'my home is wherever I am with my parents'. That child knew that wherever his parents were sent they would make a home for him. There are a few refugee families from Syria now living in West Oxon .If you encounter them or any other refugees are you going to make them welcome?

How do we respond not only at Christmas time but throughout our daily lives to the words of Jesus in Matthew: 25-45 when he talked about being given food and drink when he was hungry and thirsty; being given clothes when he needed them. Being a stranger and being invited in. Being visited in prison. When the disciples questioned Him about seeing Him in these situations Jesus replied 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

As we celebrate this Christmas let us remember God's faithfulness and act on the teachings of Jesus. The words by Michael Jugessar taken from the URC Prayer Handbook remind us not only to pray but to take action for those in need.

Every Blessing - Beryl

## **Faith and faithfulness**

God-steadfast-and-loving

We pray for the hungry and the thirsty; for all who work to relieve suffering, and develop measures so that none will hunger and thirst.

**Loving God, may our actions reflect your way of overflowing love!**

We pray for strangers and outsiders, new people around us:  
that they find the affirming power of respect, welcome and community.

**Loving God, may our actions reflect your way of abundant love!**

We pray for homeless and displaced people, all who are dispirited and deprived of full life. May we work together to find new opportunities and make hope real.

**Loving God, may our actions reflect your way of abundant love!**

We pray for the imprisoned – victims of bent up ways of living, of circumstances, of mistaken convictions, and of conscience. May we work towards their rehabilitation and liberation.

**Loving God, may our actions reflect your way of abundant love!**

We pray for the sick and suffering: for all who serve to care for those at home, in hospitals, in hospices, and in makeshift tents pitched in places of war and extreme poverty.

**Loving God, may our actions reflect your way of abundant love!**

Continue to fill us with discomfort at easy answers, anger at injustice, tears for the suffering and courage to believe that we can make a difference. In the name of the One who embodied full life for all, we pray.

*Michael Jagessar*

*Please note that for up-to-date prayer requests contact Beryl Cartwright (703717)*

## Bible Study

In this edition, and with permission from Ken & Marjorie Lee's family, and in memoriam to Rev Ken Lee, a series of Bible Studies, written by Ken and first submitted back in 1999, will be re-produced and is entitled:

### MEANDERING IN MARK

*"Meander" means "To wander deviously or aimlessly". Perchance this is not too accurate a description of these studies; it is hoped that they are not too devious nor totally aimless. However, the term "meander" is used to indicate an approach which takes its time, stops as needful to let a thought, an idea, an insight develop - all with the purpose of seeing what the Lord has to say to his people. May He speak, and to Him be the glory.*

#### 2. Mark 1:9-15

"In those days Jesus came." Having asserted that he is writing about "The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God", Mark now introduces Jesus with these simple words. In the midst of all the mass of ordinary people whom John is baptizing in Jordan Jesus came, came as one of the crowd to be baptized in repentance for the forgiveness of sins. At this moment there is nothing to distinguish this Jesus from the rest of the crowd; neither the crowd nor John sees anything different about him to indicate that he is the expected One. So far as Mark is concerned, John the Baptist neither knows Jesus nor recognises him as the Messiah. Jesus is just another penitent with whom John exercises his ministry. Did Jesus stand out in the crowd? It seems unlikely - although if he did it would be because he was a Galilean, for earlier Mark has recorded that the crowd came from the Judean countryside and from Jerusalem. But Jesus is said to come from Nazareth of

Galilee. As a Galilean he would have spoken with a "northern accent" and been regarded by many Judaeans as being slightly uncouth. Certainly few would look for the Coming One to be a Galilean despite the fact that many of the great prophets had come from obscure and unexpected places.

Jesus comes and is baptized by John and that, according to Mark's account, so far as John and the crowd were concerned, was all that happened. Nobody, other than Jesus, experienced anything else at that time. If they had seen the vision, heard the voice, would there not have been an immediate reaction, a turning to Jesus for guidance or counsel; or maybe, there and then, an attempt to make him a king? But none of these things happen; Mark records that Jesus comes, is baptized and goes away. For John and the crowd that is the event, just one more baptism among many. None of those present realises what is actually happening for Jesus and what that happening is going to mean for them and for all humanity. Perchance when we can see nothing happening to people in our worship or our evangelistic events we should remember Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus: God acts for whom He will and as He wills without any showy demonstration to those around.

For Jesus, his baptism sparks off an opening out of his relationship with God. As he came from the water Jesus saw "the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him". Picture language of course. The tearing apart of the heavens speaks of the opening of a direct vision to God who has been depicted by both the Psalmist and by Deutero-Isaiah as dwelling beyond the curtain of the heavens (Ps. 104:2, Isaiah 40:22). Similarly, the depiction of the Spirit as a dove carries the mind back to

Creation, to the Spirit of God hovering over the chaos as God begins his great new work. As then, so now at this Baptism of Jesus, there is a new creation coming, a new beginning, even as there was a new beginning, a new opportunity for humanity when, in the story of Noah and the Flood, the dove returned to the ark bringing the olive leaf, symbol of life beginning anew. The vision which Jesus received told him that now something new is to begin, something directly empowered from God. And to confirm the vision there is the voice speaking words which combine the message to the Servant in Isaiah 42:1 and the acknowledgement of the king as God's begotten Son in Psalm 2. Vision and words bring together much of the creating, renewing themes to be found in the Law and the Prophets. As Jesus had united himself with ordinary people by coming as one of them for John's baptism, so now he is to bring the whole of the experience of the People of God into a Unity in himself through his own Unity with the Father.

Surely such is a bit of a tall order for a man who up to now has lived a quiet life in Nazareth of Galilee! Picture the human Jesus caught between the challenge of the vision, his desire to serve God and the longing to go home and carry on with his quiet life. But then, why had he come to be baptized by John? Surely it was because he was conscious that the "quiet life" was not all that God intended for him. Now he had confirmation of that fact. But what was he to do? Mark expresses it like this: "The Spirit drove him out into the wilderness." The wilderness was the place of quiet, quiet such as life at Nazareth could never allow, quiet to have time to pray, to think, to listen. Jesus was there for forty days. "Forty" is one of those Biblical numbers which keeps cropping up as signifying a

long period of time, a period of preparation and of change. So it was that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years, becoming a new people fitted to enter the Promised Land. Now Mark presents the picture of Jesus having forty days in the wilderness, forty days to change from thinking and acting and living as a resident of Nazareth into the One whom John proclaimed was to come. Mark pictures this time as being "Tempted by Satan". But Jesus is there in the Wilderness to be tempted because he has been "driven by the Spirit". The picture here is of the Will of God being worked out. The Satan is sent as God's servant, in a manner similar to that depicted in Job 1. Satan comes with ideas and thoughts to test all whom God calls, to present to them situations and possibilities as to the way ahead, as to how to live, as to how to achieve that which is desirable. This testing by Satan is of the will and purpose of God. It is a means of strengthening for that which lies ahead. So it is here depicted by Mark for Jesus. The testing is accompanied by the "waiting on" by angels, messengers of God. Jesus is not left alone with Satan, there is the constant coming of messages from God through the ministrations of the angels. What a picture this is of that which always is, the picture that when the Tempter is around, is at work, so also present are the Messengers of God to strengthen and to sustain. God never lets us be tempted without providing the sustenance that is needed to bring us through, strengthened by the experience. As it was for Jesus, so to it is for those who walk in his Way.

Mark records one further detail about the wilderness experience of Jesus; the presence there of wild beasts. What are we to make of their presence being recorded? Maybe it is just a picture of the nature of the wilderness, or maybe it

is part of that renewal which is to come through the Christ, that time which the prophet foresaw, when the lion and the lamb should feed together and a little child should lead them (Isaiah 11:6-9). The "wilderness time" was, for Jesus, a putting together of all he had absorbed of the Scriptures and of God into a pattern for his ministry, a ministry which was to bring good news not just for Israel, nor even for all humanity, but for all creation. The Unity which Christ was to bring and is yet still to bring will, as the Apostle Paul proclaims in Romans 8, embrace all when the children of God are fully revealed. It is to that ministry which Jesus now turns.

"After John was arrested, Jesus came." For Mark, John the Baptist has done his job. Jesus starts his ministry when John's is finished. All is now focused upon Jesus who comes back to Galilee. At this stage Mark does not locate the place of Jesus's ministry more precisely. At his point Mark is concerned to record the salient features of the message which Jesus gives. Possibly what Mark gives here is a précis in his own words of the substance of what Jesus said in these early days of his Galilean Ministry. Whether this is so or not, Mark emphasises that this ministry of Jesus is "proclaiming the good news of God (or as some some ancient manuscripts read, "the kingdom of God"). This good news comes under three heads: immediacy in time, immediacy in space, immediacy in action.

"The time is fulfilled". Such is the first message of Jesus. For much of human history there has been an expectation that there is, there can only be so much of this thing we call "time". Time must be leading somewhere, to some sort of climax. That idea is with humanity still. It brings forth all sorts of expectations of "last days", of a grand or terrifying finish to creation as we know it. "The Time",

whatever you or I may tend to mean by that term, will come; the time when there will be no more time. Time has to be fulfilled, to be filled out with ultimate meaning. Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming that with his coming, the time was indeed fulfilled, that the meeting with him was and is the decisive moment.

This is the constant challenge of Jesus. The decisive time has come when a person meets with him. No longer is there to be a putting off, a waiting for tomorrow, for the decisive moment is NOW. Why? Because "the kingdom of God has come near".

Such is the second immediacy in the preaching of Jesus. God's kingdom is right on the doorstep, not just in time but in space. It is happening here and now just where the hearer of the message of Jesus is living their life. There is no question of waiting until we get to the kingdom, for the kingdom is wheresoever God is accepted as the King. Jesus proclaims that the kingdom has come as near as he has come. How can this be unless it be true that in the presence of Jesus a person is in the presence of God? Jesus is so convinced of his unity with the Father that he claims that in his presence and in his words are to be found the reality of the presence of God and the words of God. Those who meet with Jesus must either accept or reject the truth of his claim, the claim that to make the kingdom real, here and now, all that is required is to obey the words of God, the will of God - by listening to Jesus and acting upon his words.

The action called for is repentance and belief. Repentance is essentially a changing of one's mind about past actions and ways of living while belief is so to trust in somebody or something as to make that person or thing the controlling factor in one's way of living. Jesus calls



for all to whom he speaks to change their minds about that which has guided their living in days gone by and to put their whole trust in that which he proclaims, the good news. This good news is inextricably tied up with the person of Jesus for without him and without the relationship to God which he is claiming, there is no good news. Mark, in the opening words of his gospel, has already shown his own commitment to the reality of this good news in Jesus, the Christ. However, as Mark writes of this initial preaching of Jesus in Galilee, there is no indication that those who heard Jesus saw in him anything other than a fellow-Galilean who had "gone religious" and was making somewhat outrageous claims. There was, at this stage, no proof that Jesus was "good news", nor was there any sensible reason for anyone to follow Jesus. Unless..... unless there was something about him which made people believe that what he said was true! Everything depended upon the encounter with Jesus: it still does.



The following article, written by Canon David Winter, has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

## **And there were shepherds**

Luke's story of the birth of Jesus is brilliantly told – the angel's visit to Mary to tell her she would be mother of the long-promised Messiah, the old priest in the Temple told by another angel that his wife would have a son to be called 'John',

who would prepare the people of Israel for that event, and then Mary and Joseph making the 60 mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, as required by the Roman census. When they got there, no room at the inn, and they settled instead for a convenient stable, where Mary gave birth to a boy child.

Suddenly, Luke changes the tone. 'And there were shepherds ...' – that's what he actually wrote, just like that. 'And there were shepherds', doing exactly what shepherds do, looking after their flocks by night. But this night was different: yet another angelic message – a call to abandon their sheep and go into Bethlehem to see the baby Messiah. They were given directions and a 'sign' to identify Him. He would be lying in a feeding trough. Well, at least they would recognise that.

And why the shepherds, in this glorious story of our salvation? Because the event needed witnesses, and the chosen witnesses would be this bunch of scruffy, smelly shepherds straight from the sheep-pen. Nothing could speak more eloquently of God's purpose than that. This was not a Saviour for the strong, rich and powerful, but for everybody. The carpenter and his wife guarded the Saviour of the world, and the very first witnesses were not kings or priests but a handful of shepherds.



The following is the second in a series of 5 Sermons submitted by Rev Dr Jason Boyd

## **2. If these stones could talk**

1 Peter 2:4-10

Dad was building a house! Our family lived in a mobile home on a farm seven and a half miles out of the town. The birth of my sister meant that there were four children and two adults living in an increasingly cramped space. It was time to move.

My folks had sifted through the catalogues with plans for various layouts and finally decided on what they would build. A plot of land was purchased in the town and the build began. Through a child's eyes it seemed like magic. One moment I peered into a hole dug into the earth and the next the concrete foundations had been poured into place. The timber frame was conjured out of nowhere and soon the rafters were covered by plywood sheets and shingled against the elements.

The interior began to take shape into various rooms as the studs were put in place. Fiberglass insulated the external walls. Plaster board was nailed onto the studs. Wiring, heating, plumbing was followed by flooring. It all happened in a few short months over the winter.

When we moved in the novelty of space and the newness of everything was quite overwhelming. It took time for this house to become a home as pictures were hung and things found a place. It took time for this house to become a home with the crackling of birch burning behind glass doors in the fireplace. I feel as if I can still recall every nook and cranny of that house. So many things happened there, memories that have laid a deep track in my mind.

Church buildings become homes for faithful folk. We find a comfortable place

to sit. We celebrate love at weddings and mourn people's lives at funerals. We laugh. We cry. We disagree. We find consensus. We give our time. We give our finance. We worry about the dry rot and the leaks and the worn out pipe organ. We recall fondly the full Sunday School – that dynamic minister who was a superhero to all – the choir now defunct. We hope that tomorrow will come and that the church will flourish. We argue over the colour of the carpet and the paintwork. We deliberate for long hours over finance. All of this happens in and around a building which becomes more than a building. It becomes a home for our worship.

"If the walls could talk!" is often exclaimed as we reflect on the deeds done and the words said in a particular building. In homes, churches and other buildings I'm often curious to know the secrets kept by the walls. Wouldn't it be fascinating to be able to persuade them to break their confidences?

We know the truth. A house is a house. The walls don't speak. The stones are cold. The bricks are rough. The wood is full of splinters.

We know the truth. A church building is a church building. The walls don't speak. The pews are not immovable. The pulpit is not six feet above contradiction. The organ is here today and guitars and drum kits tomorrow. The high tech equipment has replaced the hymnbook.

We are Congregationalists. We know that the Church is not the building. The Church is "...where two or three are gathered in my name..." (Matthew 18:20). Yet if the Church is about the people who are gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ, why then do we spend so much time on building churches and maintaining them? If we look at our Church minutes for the diaconate and the Church

Meeting, how much time do we spend on thinking about buildings and finance?

Those who heard 1 Peter for the first time were being told that through God's mercy they had been given new birth into a living hope: a **living** hope. It was a living hope because Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead (1:3). This new birth into a living hope was through God's "enduring word" (1:23). Having been born anew – or born again – we are compared to infants needing milk. We are to crave "pure, spiritual milk" for our growth "into salvation" (2:2).

This new birth into a living hope of the risen Jesus through the living word leads to an invitation. "Come," the writer implores. "Come to Jesus the living stone." What an odd image! What on earth is a living stone? Are stones not solid and cold, hard and lifeless? How can a stone be alive?

It is not clear why the metaphor of 'living stone' is chosen though it is likely connected to the 'living hope' and the 'living word of God'. The resurrection of Jesus and the enduring nature of God's word which gives us new birth gives a sense of the way in which Jesus is the 'living stone'. It is also possible that Jesus is the 'living stone' in contrast to the inanimate idols made of stone and wood.

Jesus is the living stone rejected by human beings and yet chosen and precious in God's eyes. His humble origins and promising career ended in ignoble death. Human beings had every reason to dismiss him – even to mock him. And yet God chose him and honoured him.

Those who come to the living stone are themselves like living stones – chosen and precious. Those who first heard this letter were described as exiles. They were followers of Jesus – some Jewish and some non-Jewish (we cannot be sure).

They were in a minority following a dead leader whom they claimed had been raised from the dead. They were the butt of jokes and abuse, sometimes suffering loss of property and their lives. Like Jesus the living stone, who was despised, put to death, and raised from the dead, they would suffer too. Like Jesus chosen by God and honoured as being of utmost value, they too were chosen by God and honoured.

As living stones we are being constructed into a living and breathing house. As living stones we are a holy priesthood offering 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ'. Our sacrifices are not part of the cultic temple ritual. Instead, these sacrifices are our deeds of holy conduct.

The writer turns to the prophet Isaiah who in 28:16 peers into the future and sees one who will be a solid foundation, a keystone of inestimable value. Anyone who believes in him – or relies on him (NJB) will not be humiliated.

For those who believe in the Lord, he is precious – valued above all – to be honoured. For those who do not believe, they are among those who have rejected the keystone (Psalm 118:22) and who have stumbled over the stone to their own destruction (Is. 8:14). This stumbling is tripping up over the word – being disobedient to the good news that beckons to a life of love.

Those who believe are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's very own people (Ex. 19:5-6). Their purpose is to proclaim the mighty actions of God – the one who called them from the pitch black of night into the dazzling light of day. Drawing on the words of the prophet Hosea (1:6-9; 2:3, 25) he says that they have been transformed from being a non-people to being God's nation;

transformed from objects of wrath to recipients of mercy.

The Greek word behind 'people' is λαος and is where the English word 'laity' comes from. We often speak of ministers and the laity. The ministers are the people who do ministry expertly and the laity help out the ordained person in ministry. The message of this letter contradicts such a view: the laity is the whole people of God, the living stones, a living spiritual house, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. There is no room in this scheme for a specialised 'ordained' ministry. We are all in this together.

What is the purpose of the living stones being built upon the living stone? What is the job of this living and breathing spiritual house? Can you hear it whisper? If only these stones could talk...

That's it! If only these stone could talk! And they can! And they must! The living stones built on the living stone are to proclaim God's mighty acts. He has brought us from darkness to light! He has made us a people! He has given us his mercy!

Will you speak? Will you tell? Who will you talk to? Who will you share the living hope of the risen Jesus with in the days ahead?

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On the inside of ladies toilets on many motorways you can read this message from ActionAid:

"You've lost your home. You've lost your family. Now you've got your period."

Witney Refuge Action Group (WRAG) who helped facilitate last month's Cafe Church have given us an opportunity to help. They make up and send packs of reusable menstrual pads.

Elaine Kinchin is happy to sew up pads and shells for these packs but if you would like to help, Elaine needs old towels/flannels and 100% cotton fabric (e.g. unwanted or outgrown shirts, skirts, PJs etc). Please contact Elaine at church or on 01993 776244

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The following has been submitted anomalously, and is entitled:

## Refugees

REFUGE I SEEK; THAT'S SAFETY. AN

EXTREME SITUATION I'M

FLEEING – READY OR NOT

UNWILLING BOTH TO STAY AND TO GO.

GOD'S IN THE SITUATION. ISN'T HE?

EGYPT WAS SAFE FOR THE INFANT JESUS

EMIGRÉ OR REFUGEE – JUST WORDS. I  
KNOW MY

SAVING IS IN GOD'S HANDS – AND  
YOURS.

Inspired by Café Church 26/11/17