

CORNERSTONE

The Magazine of
WITNEY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH



Christ Jesus is the chief cornerstone.

In Him the whole fabric is bound together, as it grows into a temple.
dedicated to the Lord (Ephesians 2:21)



December 2020 & January 2021



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It is now the last week in November, and sadly, as I write this, my normal pre-Christmas cheer is a bit strained this year. Lockdown is back, and once again our churches are closed. It is hard and so strange to be living in a community but unable to meet with local people. To drive past the church, and to know that it will be empty for weeks to come.

As I look back over the last 9 months, I don't think anyone would have imagined what a profound impact COVID would have on our lives. I think we all hoped that it might be short-lived and that we would be able to return to our normal way of lives quite quickly. That has not been the case. I am sure that many of you, like me, have been frustrated that there is little we can do, other than follow the latest advice.

Many people in our community will be dreading a Christmas spent on their own. They will need, more than ever, the true message of Christmas – the love and peace that God intends for them, through his Son Emmanuel, the baby born in Bethlehem.

I hope this Christmas & New Year edition of the magazine will remind you that you are not forgotten by God, and that as Christians, we are praying for you at this difficult time.

However, as this is the last page of the magazine I complete, and as I return to do so, the lockdown has finished and Oxfordshire is now in Tier 2 restrictions which means the church again will be open for Sunday morning worship ONLY from Sunday 6th December when this magazine will be available

Jesus Christ is born! God is with us, now and forever

So, on that note, I now turn to some of this month's contents: Lesley Barter, once again, gives us the Deacon's Letter; there is the continuation of Ken Lee's Bible Study and some articles have been extracted, by myself, from books given to me by Theo Howells and articles have been extracted from Parish Pump, 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

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

The next 2-monthly edition, covering February & March is due on **Sunday 7th February**

Your Editor



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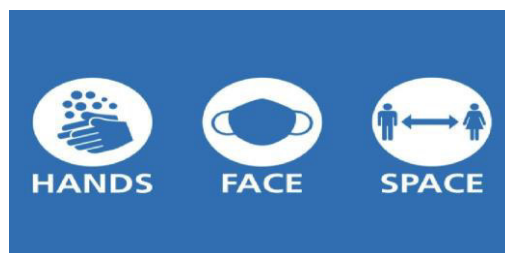


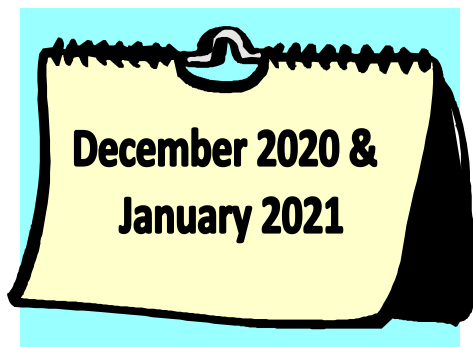
From Wednesday 2 December Oxfordshire is in the tier 2 alert level following the end of national lockdown.

Some existing guidance remains the same in that people should continue to work from home if they can do so, and education and childcare remain open. We're also being encouraged to travel only if essential to do so. But remember that **when travelling between areas that are in different tiers, you must adopt whichever restrictions are higher to prevent the spread of the virus.**

What are the new tier 2 rules?

- There should be no mixing of households indoors apart from support bubbles.
- A maximum of six people are allowed to meet outdoors.
- Hospitality venues will be allowed to stay open until 11pm – with last orders at 10pm. However, only those that serve substantial meals can operate and alcohol can only be served with substantial meals.
- All essential and non-essential retail can now open, provided they have COVID-secure measures in place.
- Personal care services, such as hairdressers, can reopen.
- Indoor leisure activities can resume, with restrictions in place.
- Accommodation can reopen, but in all cases overnight stays are only permitted with your own household or support bubble.
- Weddings and funerals can continue to take place, with restrictions in place.
- Entertainment can reopen, with restrictions in place.
- Places of worship can open, but individuals cannot interact with anyone outside the household or support bubble.
- Residential care visits can resume, with restrictions in place.
- Large events can resume, with capacity limited to 50% or 2,000 people outdoors, and 50% or 1,000 people indoors - whichever is lower.





Reflections during COVID-19 pandemic

10.30am weekly & arrive at 10.15am - services will be short and reflective due to the fact that we are not allowed to sing

Dec

6th Rev Judi Holloway
 13th Rev Elaine Kinchin
 20th Rev Judi Holloway
 25th David Kinchin
 27th Rev Elaine Kinchin

Communion

Jan

3rd Rev Judi Holloway
 10th Rev Elaine Kinchin
 17th Rev Judi Holloway
 24th Rev Elaine Kinchin
 31st David Kinchin

Communion

Feb

7th Rev Elaine Kinchin

Dec 06 Sue Birdseye
 07 Charlotte Hathaway
 16 Layla Holloway
 25 Preston Holloway
 29 Cecily Lau



Jan 02 Benjamin Esapa
 Joseph Esapa
 Margaret Esapa
 Gwen Mee
 07 Brian Bennett
 Storm Wallace
 24 David Kinchin

Feb 04 Elaine Beechey

Different as it is going to be this year:

Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and a



Deacons' Letter

Dear Friends

As we write it looks very much as if Christmas will indeed be different this year. For many it will mean the loss of the annual social events that they look forward to and restricted contact with people that they are close to. Never have we all been so eager to turn the page on a year that has brought suffering all over the world.

So what have we learned from the enforced naval-gazing that has been 2020? The big lesson has probably been not to take anything for granted. Very few of us would have believed that the world could come to a standstill so quickly and so thoroughly as a result of something that we can't even see, and certainly didn't see coming. We are reminded that we aren't as clever as we thought and there are many things that we still can't predict.

Another lesson is about simple pleasures. We now know how therapeutic is the natural world, so let us hope that will teach us to look after it better. A walk in the country, time to sit and listen to music or read a book without feeling guilty.

Indeed, time spent just dreaming is not time wasted – it is probably a lot more productive than chasing our tails. It allows us to listen to God, who gets drowned out too often in normal times. The biggest benefits to mankind have not been achieved by cramming more and more stuff into the day.

It has also been an opportunity to take stock and evaluate what is really important in our lives. What better time could there be to make overdue changes?

Many of us have finally got around to doing some jobs at home that have been put off indefinitely. Next, we can make changes in our lives before they get stuck back in their old grooves. Easier said than done, you may feel. But we have help. The Bible is full of stories about people who were faced with hugely difficult challenges, but God carried them through, just as he will carry us. We just have to trust Him.

So, 2021 awaits, full of the unexpected but also full of promise. We pray that by next Christmas we shall be vaccinated against Covid, we shall all be worshipping together again and be well on the way to appointing a new Minister. If you want a code of behaviour for the year, try Romans 12 v 9 – 21. That should keep us focused!

In past years we have reflected sadly that Christmas has been hijacked by commercialism. This is a moment for everybody to come face to face with what is really worth celebrating. God bless you all and grant you good health and contentment at Christmas and in the year to come.

The Deacons

Next Christmas

The grandson had just taken a photograph of his grandmother who'd come to stay for Christmas and her 89th birthday.

'Grannie, I sure hope I'm around next year to photograph you on your 90th birthday,' he said tactfully.

'Why not?' his grandmother shrugged. 'You look healthy enough.'

Treasurers Update

Friends, these remain difficult times for us all I am sure. Looking at the church accounts things are ticking over very well actually.

First the basics. As of 30th November, the church bank accounts look healthy enough.

- Deposit accounts. _ £ 59,000.04p
- Cheque account. _ £ 4,824.09p

In line with the Annual Meeting – a sum of £1,000 is being paid to Mary's meals on 1st December. We may be able to pay them a little more later in the New Year, depending upon income. We do need to spend some money on the shop in 33A High Street. This is almost exclusively on the electrics within the building. (The electrics in 33a have always been a challenge). Things need updating and improving and depending on who/what organisation is going to rent the premises we will need to add some heating to the building. The estimated cost of all of this is around £4,000 to £5,000 over then next couple of months. We suffered a minor leak in the female toilets in the main church building, but that was cheaply and expertly repaired by our excellent plumber, Jules. Minor issues with the firing up of our heating boilers seem to be solved at present.

We hope to receive our Gift Aid cheque in the New year. This will be lower than in previous years as we have not been holding services during the summer months. This is in essence, free money. So if you feel that as a tax-payer you can gift aid your donations to church then please let me know.

The commercial rentals continue to do well. Just the one vacant property (the shop), but we continue to receive tentative enquiries about this let. My thanks go to Jacqui for her help in this.

Regarding the two domestic rentals, I can tell you we will have new residents in the Manse in December. A married couple are taking on the property on a 12-month contract, paying £1,195 per month. The tenants in the flat come to the end of their agreement in March 2021. We will then take that opportunity to refurbish the flat in possible readiness for a new Minister (in the short term at any rate). It may even be that long term our new minister may live at the Flat rather than then Manse; this will depend largely upon the family circumstances of the new minister. Rest assured though, there are no plans to sell the Manse. That remains an asset we need to hang on to.

Lendwithcare had been suspended in part. Some loans are being repaid again as people start to return to work around the world. However, we **MUST** be prepared for the fact that some entrepreneurs will default on their loans. For them, repaying our church is the least of their worries. Currently we have 13 loans where the entrepreneur is unable to make payments at the present time. These are all either in Africa or South America. Our other 66 current loans are making repayments which we continue to reinvest each month.

Over the three years we have been working with Lendwithcare we have invested a total of £2,600, made over 230 different loans, creating 424 new jobs, helping 1,837 entrepreneurs and assisting 5,329 family members. For a church with a membership in the low 30's this is a fantastic achievement, and for those who love statistics, it means each individual church member has helped around **150** people around the world. Thank you from them.

Every blessing, **David Kinchin** (treasurer)



PRAYER LETTER

No 195

Decisions and Dreams

Rules and Regulations

Our everyday life is affected by the decisions we make but who or what influences these decisions? Do we make our own decisions or ask advice from family or friends? Is God left out? Do we pray about the situation? How do we think that God speaks to us? Is it through people, dreams, angels?

This year, we as a Nation, have had additional rules, restrictions and regulations imposed upon us by our Government. Any Nation should have basic and just rules to be effectively governed for the wellbeing of all their inhabitants.

As Christians we accept and try to live not only by our Government's rules but by God's Rules, following the Ten Commandments and the additional Commandment that Jesus gave to his Disciples 'to love one another as you love yourself'.

As we approach Christmas we are reminded of the Nativity Story and to celebrate the birth of Christ. In Mathew's Gospel we are told that when Joseph who was a righteous man, already betrothed to Mary, found out that she was pregnant decided to divorce her quietly to save her from public disgrace. God intervened through an Angel of the Lord, 'telling Joseph not to be afraid of taking Mary for his wife because she was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1: 1,2) Joseph changed his mind and married Mary obeying what the Lord God had commanded.

Another important decision Joseph had to make was to obey the Decree issued by the Roman Emperor and travel to Bethlehem from Nazareth with his heavily pregnant wife. Joseph was obedient to the Roman Authorities unaware of what the future would be. After the birth of Jesus, the Bible doesn't tell us why Joseph found suitable accommodation in Bethlehem for approximately 2 years instead of returning to Nazareth. Why did the Wise Men follow the star and why did they take the symbolic gifts of Gold Frankincense and Myrrh? Did their knowledge of the Universe or a Supreme Being influence their journey? Was Joseph thinking of going back to Nazareth before Herod issued his Decree to kill all baby boys 2 years old and under after the visit of the Wise Men enquiring about the birth of a New King and wanting to worship him? Having found the baby Jesus and given their gifts the Wise Magi were warned in a dream not to report back to Herod but to return to their country by another route. They believed in the dream and obeyed. Again God spoke to Joseph in a dream telling him to take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt and stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child and kill him. (Matthew 2:13) Again Joseph obeyed and with Mary and Jesus escaped as refugees to the safe haven of Egypt.

What incredible decisions had to be made but with God's help the warnings were accepted, and followed. Life was not easy. Life is not easy.

Since March most of our decisions have been taken out of our hands by the Government due to the Corona Pandemic. Rules restrictions have inhibited our travels, meeting people, social gatherings, where to work, when to work etc.

Living in a 'Free Society' we take most of our freedoms for granted. Although during the periods of National Lockdown we weren't allowed to physically worship together it didn't stop us from worshipping at home privately or with the aid of modern technology. During the dark days and months of the Corona Pandemic so many plans have been cancelled or postponed, So much grief with thousands of deaths, so many people made unemployed but there has been hope and faith in the scientists to produce a vaccine. Now there is light at the end of the tunnel with news of a vaccine being administered in the very near future.

Give thanks and praise to God for the incredible talents and skills of the scientists in discovering the vaccines.

Jesus was born into a world of Darkness but he is known as

HOPE FOR THE WORLD, LIGHT OF THE WORLD, PRINCE OF PEACE

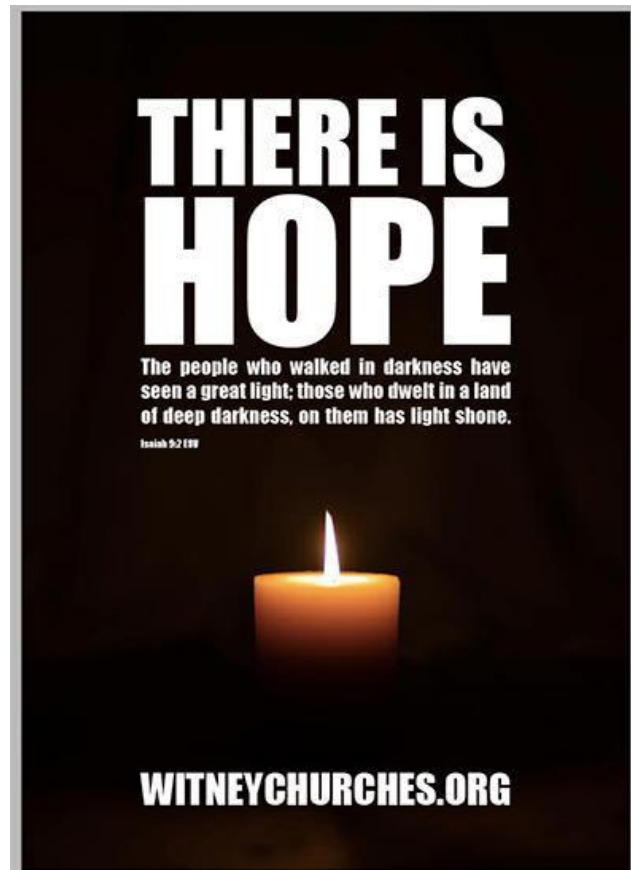
Be aware that God works in mysterious ways, may be through ordinary people or through signs and dreams.

Whatever circumstances you are in and whatever decisions you have to face, may you know God's Grace and the Light of Jesus and Peace of the Holy Spirit this Christmas in the days, months and years ahead.

Every Blessing,

Beryl

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



Churches Together in Witney & District

The following Carol, written & composed by Alan Lyndsay, has been submitted by Beryl Cartwright, and is entitled:

Star Shines Brightly

Star shines brightly guiding from on high
Wise men know, while others question why
See the star it's pointing to the site
Joy to the world, on this special night
Born with a purpose, unlike yours or mine
Born is a Saviour
Born to die a sacrifice
Die death to pay a price

Star shines brightly shouting from above
God's message, wondrous gift of love
Star now fades its purpose has been done
God's great plan to send His only son
Born with a purpose, to be a light
Born is a Saviour
Show the Way, the Truth, the Life
He's the Way, the Truth, the Life

***Oh let our hearts be filled with light
And let it glow wherever you are
The gift of light can brighten every life
No matter who you are
Peace, hope and love are yours
Peace, hope and love are yours
If you will only take it, only take it, only
take it ...***

Star shines brightly through God's only Son

Never to fade, the victory is won
Always a light for all the world to see
Christmas and Easter, signs of jubilee
Born with a purpose, to take the light
Each one of us to share the light
Each one of us to share the light
To spread the light, to be the light

Repeat chorus



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

The Story is still the same!

'Christmas may look different, but the story is still the same!' That's the message for Christmas in 2020. Coronavirus will make our celebrations this year look very different from usual. However, the message of the baby born in Bethlehem is still relevant!

In one nativity play, the highlight was to illuminate Jesus, with a light in the manger, when all the other lights were turned off. At the appropriate time, all the lights went out, including the manger one. The silence was broken when one of the shepherds loudly whispered: 'Hey, you turned off Jesus.' Of course, nobody can turn off Jesus this Christmas!

The angels announced, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord.' (Luke 2: 10,11). The birth of this baby brings great joy and good news for everyone! As the king of the universe, He has come as our Saviour. In an uncertain world, He offers joy and hope, because He holds this pandemic in His hands. This is a real cause for joy!

'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favour rests.' (Luke 2:14). We may feel anything but peace amid the anxieties over our current circumstances. How can a Jewish infant born to a peasant family in first century Palestine bring peace to our lives today? Jesus established peace with God through His death on the cross. Trusting the Prince of Peace for our lives brings God's peace amid the huge uncertainties we face. As the carol says, 'Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her King.'

The following articles have been chosen by myself and extracted from the book 'Tell Everyone' by Rev JR Edwards, and was given to me by Theo Howells:

Peace & Plenty

Some years ago, passing along a London street, I stood for a few minutes on the edge of a crowd that was listening to a speaker. The people were enjoying themselves, and so was the little man on the box. Most of what was said I have forgotten, but I remember one of the stories and I find it is the stories that interest and remain

The man told of a housekeeper who had grown old in service; so old that she could carry on no longer. Instead of dismissing her, those whom she had served arranged for her to spend her remaining days in a cottage in the country, and at their expense. 'Not a bad way to treat a faithful servant', said the speaker with a 'Hear, hear!!' from the crowd

Old Mrs seventy-five was content. Her income was small, but her wants were few. There was enough – for herself

One morning she received a letter from the big house in town to say that one of the young ladies was bringing a few of her friends down to the cottage to spend the day

This was unwelcome news, not because the old servant did not want to receive the young woman she had nursed as a child, but because her cupboard, like that of old Mother Hubbard, was bare. There were no shops handy, and, even if there were, she couldn't buy without money

What could she do?

'I believe' remarked the little man, with a knowing smile, 'I believe it is the usual thing for young ladies, in their letter writing, to forget and then to remember. It was so in this case. Here was a

postscript: 'Don't trouble about anything as we are bringing our own provisions, enough for all'

That put a different complexion on things

'We are bring our own provisions' repeated the old lady, her face lighting up.' Then come, and welcome!' she exclaimed; and she laughed aloud

They came. I did not hear how they got on, but no doubt they had a great time

The man on the box proceeded with his application. He went on to tell us that lots of people hesitate to receive Christ into their life because they imagine that His coming will deprive them of such little comforts and pleasures as they possess. He poked fun at the idea, and showed that the entertainment of Christ is not an impoverishment, but an enrichment; not a loss, but a gain

It must be over twenty years since I listened to the story of the old housekeeper. Many of those who stood with me in the crowd must have passed on, but the notion against which the little man was protesting is still with us

The boy who got stuck

The other day the following paragraph appeared in London newspapers:

'To get a better view of a steam tug passing under Westminster Bridge, a boy, five years of age, put his head through the iron balustrade, and then found that he could not withdraw it and started to cry. A crowd collected. Eight or nine policemen came on the scene, and tried to extricate the boy's head. A doctor and one or two students hurried from St Thomas' hospital

'The ambulance was summoned. Then came the fire engine. A river watchman in a boat under the arch got ready for any emergency. Not until a fireman cut away a piece of the balustrade with a hacksaw could the boy be released. He had been imprisoned by the neck for three quarters of an hour, and was taken to the hospital suffering from a slight abrasion'

That was what a little fellow got for his curiosity. He wanted to see a steam tug on the Thames, and he would have been a strange boy had he not wanted to see a steam tug on the Thames

He was too short to see over the side of the bridge, and so – well, there was only one thing to do – namely, to push his head through an opening in the iron balustrade. Once through, his head got stuck

Perhaps the little man had large ears. Anyhow, there he was, his feet on one side of the railing and his head on the other side. A sorry plight for a small boy on a warm day, and all for curiosity

Now, curiosity, or the desire to see what is on the other side, is a good thing, a very good thing

But for curiosity, I suppose, there would be no inventions or discoveries, and we shouldn't know so much as we do. A very excellent thing is curiosity, but it needs watching

I know young fellows who had heard so much about beer, they were curious to know the taste of it. They thought it must be more exciting than lemonade or ginger pop. They satisfied their curiosity, and now they are vainly trying to satisfy their appetite. They are held in the grip of strong drink, and not even the doctors are able to help out

Now. I am sure there were many boys on Westminster Bridge that day when the steam tug went snorting down the river.

Boys seem to spring out of the ground when there is any excitement on a London street. When they saw Walter's distress I imagine them saying to themselves: I'd like to see that old tug, but the price is too high; if I can't see the tug without becoming a prisoner, I'll not see it at all

One Solitary Life

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman, he grew up in another obscure village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30. Then, for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never had any family or owned a home. He never set foot inside a big city. He never travelled two hundred miles from the place he was born. He never wrote a book, or held an office. He did none of those things that usually accompany greatness

When He was still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against Him. His friends deserted Him. He was turned over to His enemies, and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had – His coat. When He was dead, He was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today He is still the central figure of much of the human race. All the armies that ever marched and all the navies that ever sailed and all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of humankind upon this earth as powerfully as this

'ONE SOLITARY LIFE'

The following article has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

Counting the cost of coronavirus

Happy New Year! It's good to begin a new year with hope, but few of us have left 2020 unscathed by the pandemic.

For example, nearly half of us, 48 per cent, put on weight during lockdown. (According to a recent survey by King's College London and Ipsos MORI).

Millions of us turned to alcohol or drugs. Public Health England reports that one in five of us aged 45-74 are now drinking more than 21 units a week. The Royal College of Psychiatrists expresses alarm at the rapid rise in patients whose alcohol or drug use led to a decline in their mental health in 2020.

Children have suffered. Childline had nearly 43,000 calls from young people March and October. Cyber bullying has soared, with one in three children being bullied during the pandemic, according to the Anti-Bullying Alliance.

For millions of pensioners, Covid-19 'hit the fast-forward button on ageing', according to Age UK. Lockdown left old people frightened and losing their confidence, mobility and even functions such as memory.

Suicidal thoughts soared during lockdown, with the number of people seeking help tripling, to stand at more than a quarter of a million. The Royal College of Psychiatrists warn that mental health services are now 'overflowing' with patients struggling to cope with anxiety, psychosis and depression. Many charities fear that a 'second pandemic' of mental health problems.

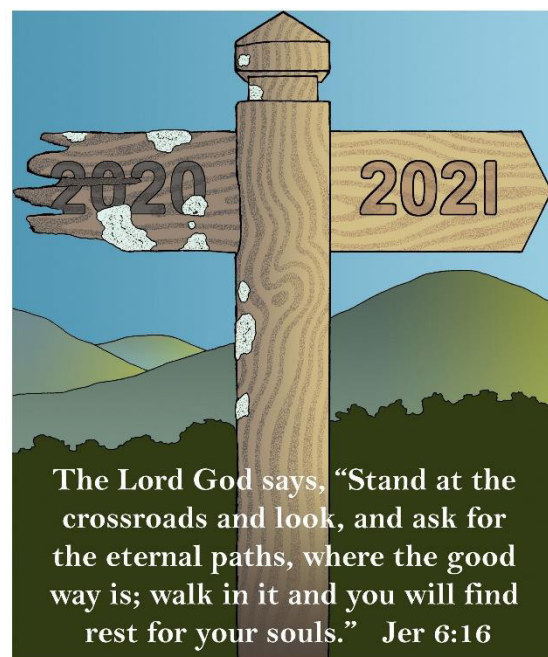
So – what do we do as January 2021 dawns? Each one of us CAN do something to make things better, if only in a small

way. How about these for your New Year Resolutions?

Firstly, just get regular exercise. As one professor said, "Exercise creates a virtuous circle of physical and mental well-being. You move more, you eat better, you feel positive." On the other hand, only a couple of weeks of lying around the house will leave your cardiovascular systems less effective, your musculoskeletal system weaker, your metabolic rate affected, and your immune system lowered.

Secondly, adopt the right mental attitude. Studies of Holocaust survivors found that those who recovered best had certain character traits of resilience: optimism, self-esteem, acceptance and above all, spirituality. A faith in God gave them purpose and meaning, even in the midst of fear and death.

Thirdly, make an effort this year to keep in touch with your friends and keep an eye out for vulnerable neighbours. Be willing to act as a safety net for others, if only to show compassion and a willingness to listen to them.



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.

15. Mark 6: 1-13

"Who is this Jesus? From whence do his powers come?" Mark has no doubt as to his own answers to these questions. The questions however continue to occur, implicitly or explicitly, in his Gospel record and are central to the event which Mark now moves on to record. Following the deeds of great power at various places around the Sea of Galilee Jesus returns, a distance of some 20 kilometres up into the hills, to his home town of Nazareth. His disciples went with him and on the Sabbath they went to the synagogue. This, for Jesus, must have been very much a return to his "home church". The synagogue at Nazareth would have been the place in which he had received much of his early instruction in the Scripture, in the Law and the Prophets. Quite possibly there were those present who had been his teachers in his childhood and youth, people who had attempted to impart knowledge, to correct misconceptions, to answer the awkward questions posed by an inquiring mind, to set his feet upon the "correct" pathway. News

would have reached them of the reputation which Jesus was building in Capernaum and elsewhere as a teacher and miracle worker. Perhaps there were even some who were glowing with a quiet pride at the success of their "star pupil". So it seems certain that when Jesus began to teach in the synagogue there was an attentive audience.

Mark provides no record of what Jesus taught in the synagogue at Nazareth any more than he had provided a record (1:21) of his teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. Mark simply records the reaction of the hearers; "They were astounded." The meaning behind this is that they were stunned, they could not really believe what they were hearing, it was too amazing, it challenged all their preconceptions regarding the faith which they held. It is interesting to note that in his report of Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum Mark records "They were astounded" whereas here at Nazareth he states "Many who heard him were astounded". At Capernaum, it appears, all the audience were struck with amazement whereas at Nazareth it would appear that there were some in the audience who were not so astonished. We may wonder about them, as to who they were. Were they simply the disciples who had come with Jesus? Or were there those present who were dissatisfied with the teaching of the faith in which they had been brought up and for whom the teaching of Jesus brought a welcome, liberating breath of fresh air, a new vision of God and his will and purpose for his people? We do not know, we are only given the reaction of the "many". Let us not forget that where there are the "many" there are also the "few" and that often the "few" have a greater understanding of the will and purpose of God than the "many".

The "many" and the "few" is a constantly occurring Biblical theme with the "remnant", the faithful few, carrying on the

witness to God's will and purpose while the many go astray. Why do the many reject God's way? The Early Church faced the problem as to why the majority of the people of Israel rejected Jesus as the Christ while the Gentiles seemed eager to claim salvation through Christ. In recording the event in the synagogue at Nazareth Mark provides a pointer to the reason for the rejection by the "many". Their first reaction is to question the source of the knowledge, the teaching, the wisdom of Jesus. They knew there was more here than the orthodox teaching he had been given in the synagogue at Nazareth during his growing years. They made no attempt to deny the deeds of power done which had been done by Jesus. They just could not understand from where all this came, how it could have come to fruition in one of whose background and family they knew. They refused to accept his teaching even if they understood what he taught because they were sure that they knew all there was to know about Jesus? "Is this not the carpenter?" they ask. The question is rhetorical, for they knew that Jesus had been their village carpenter. So we may infer from what Mark records. This is the only reference which Mark makes to Jesus's occupation before his embarking upon his ministry. Presumably the villagers of Nazareth knew. They certainly knew who was his mother and who were his brothers and sisters since these close relatives still lived amongst them. The "many" at Nazareth were sure that they knew all that was worth knowing about Jesus for he was "one of them". For them there was nothing new to be learned or experienced. So too it was to be with most of the Jews.

But what, according to Mark, was it that they said they knew about Jesus? First, he was the carpenter. The word used here in the Greek, like the corresponding Hebrew word, means a worker in stone, wood or metal. The context of the word gave to it its precise meaning. Here, in Mark's record,

the context gives us no such clue; the most we can infer is that Jesus was a craftsman, a worker with his hands. Tradition has it that Jesus was a worker with wood but this cannot be affirmed with certainty from Mark's account. The Nazarenes knew he was a craftsman, a worker with his hands whom they referred to as being a carpenter. They also knew that he was the son of Mary. Some manuscripts read "the son of the carpenter and Mary". In either form, the implication is that Jesus's father is dead. The latter form could also imply that Jesus was the eldest son of "the carpenter and Mary" since the eldest son normally followed in his father's trade. From manuscripts where no mention is made of Jesus being "the son of the carpenter" we can make no assumption as to Jesus being the eldest son. All the comments of the Nazarenes tell us is that Jesus had four brothers, who are named, and at least two sisters. Mark's Gospel gives us no other family information regarding Jesus and it is apparent that Mark either did not know of or regarded as unimportant any stories concerning special circumstances of the birth of Jesus. Equally, it does not appear that the villagers of Nazareth had any such knowledge. They thought of Mary and her family no differently from any other family in the village - it was the sheer normality of the family which caused the Nazarenes to react as they did to the teaching of Jesus in their synagogue - "they took offence at him."

The Greek word which is used here is σκανδαλιζω which can be transliterated as SKANDALIZ_. The meaning is that they found him to be a "stumbling block"; he upset their whole preconceived form of religious and moral thinking by his teaching and his behaviour. They were not prepared to accept it from "him". Possibly they might have been prepared to listen to somebody else saying the same things, but not somebody whom they knew so well. Mark records Jesus as responding to their

rejection by quoting a well-known saying of the day concerning the rejection of prophets by those who knew, or thought they knew them best. It had been the experience of countless others before Jesus, it was his experience, and it has been the experience of multitudes of the servants of God ever since. And, because there was this rejection, Mark records that Jesus could do no deeds of power there. Oh yes, he laid hands on a few sick people and cured them but the great deeds of power, such as Mark has earlier recounted, could not be repeated at Nazareth. Mark records that Jesus was astonished, he marvelled at their unbelief. The reaction of Jesus to the Nazarenes seems to have mirrored the reaction of the people who in other places saw the mighty works of power which Jesus had performed. Was the power of Jesus limited by their unbelief or was it simply that there was no desire among those people for anything much to change? Perchance they did not want to move on from where they were!

Jesus moves on. Mark records that he went about among the villages teaching. Then, at some unspecified time and place, Jesus sets his twelve apostles to work. Earlier, at 3:14-15, Mark has recorded the naming of twelve of the disciples as apostles and their commissioning under three heads. Up to now they have only been called to fulfil the first commission, to be with Jesus. Now he sends them out, two by two, renewing for them the authority over unclean spirits. Mark does not record any specific instruction as to what the disciples are to proclaim but he does record that what they did proclaim was that people should repent. He records that they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. The authority over unclean spirits seems to have been all that was needful to the apostles to relieve many from the evil that oppressed them, whether that evil be physical, mental or spiritual. It is noteworthy that Mark does not record

that all were helped by the disciples, but only that many were. There always seem to be some people who are not helped, who are not cured. We can only speculate as to why; is it because there were those who, like the many in Nazareth, would not welcome Jesus, would not welcome his disciples? Certainly in the instructions which Jesus gave to his disciples, there is provision made for lack of welcome.

The instructions given by Jesus fall into two parts, the first about provision for journeying and the second about reaction to welcome or lack of it. The disciples are to travel light, for they are not going far. Their mission is around the villages of Galilee which were only short distances from one another. They were going among people whose lives were very like those which the disciples had lived before they met with Jesus and so they could expect to rely upon traditional hospitality. Hence they were to take no provisions, no money or food nor even a bag to carry anything in. They were to wear sandals and carry a staff. They were not to wear extra clothing such as might be required for spending a night out of doors. They were to be equipped as though for a short country walk. They were not going on an expedition but were simply going out among fellow-Galileans to share what they had been given through Jesus. It was very much a "talk with the neighbours" sort of approach; yet equally it was not a "pester the neighbours" sort of approach. Jesus says to them: "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place." Obviously they would not enter a house without being invited, but once within that house the disciples were to accept the hospitality offered, not to go looking for anything better, but to rejoice that here was a welcome, and in that situation to do whatsoever they were able to bring newness of life through their experience of Jesus. A household who offered the disciples hospitality would also be open for others from the place, from the village to

come in and listen and learn and grow. But if not, if there was no house in the place where the householder said, "Come in", then Jesus told them to leave that place, and in leaving to "Shake off the dust that it on your feet as a testimony against them".

What can be made of such a gesture? It is the action performed by devout Jews on returning from a foreign land. Before stepping back onto the soil of what to them was "God's Holy Land" they would shake off the alien dust from their feet so that it should not contaminate that which was holy. Does the use of this gesture mean the casting off of those who reject the disciples and their message from the holiness of God? Or is it a symbol to them that by their rejection they show that, in spiritual terms, they are themselves outside of "God's Holy Land"? The latter seems the more likely when we think of the way in which Jesus has already welcomed those who were "outside" (1:40-42, 2:13-17, 5:1ff, 5:25-34.) By including this saying at this place in his narrative, Mark once again seems to be posing his constant question of what personal choice is made concerning Jesus. Do you accept Jesus yourself, do you let him in or keep him out? Those who did not welcome the apostles have, for the moment, kept Jesus out, denied themselves entry to the kingdom. But Mark's story does not end here, there is still more to come, further opportunities to respond to Jesus and to come to know that he is whom Mark affirms him to be, Jesus Christ the Son of God.



The following article, written by Canon Paul Hardingham, on how the promise to King Ahaz is relevant today, has been extracted

from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

Hope amid uncertainty

'Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call Him Immanuel.' (Isaiah 7:14)

This promise to King Ahaz in 8th century Judah is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus at the first Christmas: 'God with Us' (Matthew 1:23). Ahaz faced the military threat of Syria invading Israel, but Isaiah tells him not to panic. He can trust God, who is in control of the nation.

For us, Coronavirus brings deep uncertainty as we come to another New Year. We live with the threat from the virus, economic uncertainty, separation from family and friends, the loss of loved ones and the anxiety that isolation brings. Yet the message of Immanuel brings hope, as it did for Ahaz! Christmas changes everything forever! God has declared in Christ that He is with us and for us, not absent from or against us. His love is larger than our sin, fears or guilt: 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Romans 8:31).

As we prepare for the most unusual Christmas ever, let's not forget:

God with us means:

- that He is on my side and by my side. In the uncertainties of life I am never alone.
- that everything will work out according to His plan. My life isn't just a series of meaningless occasions or mistakes.
- that even when others show they are not there for me, God is.
- when circumstances change, He will give me the strength I need.
- God is with me: He isn't far away, but has made the journey into my world. Here is the hope for the future, once we get past the trees, gifts, turkey stuffing and pudding!

The following article has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

25th December: Christmas throughout the Christian world

For nearly four weeks leading up to Christmas Christians recognise a period called Advent. It means 'coming'. It is a time of spiritual preparation. 'Coming' refers to Jesus' first coming as a baby, but it also looks forward to a day when Jesus is expected to return in triumph at His 'second coming' to establish perfect justice and a new order of peace.

Originally Christians marked Advent as a time when they refrained from excessive eating and drinking. Then Christmas Day reintroduced them to the joys of feasting. Christmas celebrations lasted for 12 days, with gifts exchanged as a climax at Epiphany (6th January). Today, however, Advent is more likely to be associated with accelerating festivity, with the days following Christmas something of an anti-climax until 'twelfth night', on which decorations are removed. Many Christians worldwide are trying to revive the spirit of Advent by setting aside time to pray and address global poverty.

Christmas Day is celebrated as the anniversary of Jesus' birth, although the actual date is not known. Most Christians celebrate it on 25th December. However, the Orthodox Church (the ancient churches in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia) follows a different calendar and celebrates on 7th January. Christians make a point of taking communion on Christmas Day. Many make it the first thing they do as the clock strikes midnight.

On 6th January the Christmas festival continues with a celebration of Epiphany, which means 'the appearance'. Christians remember the visit of wise men (magi) to Jesus, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Christmas tradition of

exchanging gifts originally honoured these men, who were the first non-Jews (Gentiles) to worship Jesus. It forms a reminder that in Jesus God was giving Himself for the benefit of the entire world.

Orthodox Christians use this day to recall the baptism of Jesus as a grown man. The significance of Jesus being baptised was that He identified Himself with human beings in all their need. They mark the day by praying for God's blessing on rivers, wells and water sources.

Christmas has never been just an escapist festival for Christians. Those who treat it seriously recognise that not all the world is able to face the days with frivolity or joy. The day after Christmas, Boxing Day, was historically marked as the feast of St Stephen. He was the first man to be put to death rather than give up his belief that Jesus was God.

And two days later a day remembering the Massacre of the Innocents recalls Herod's attempt to destroy Jesus by killing all male babies in Bethlehem. Although not so widely marked as Christmas Day, it gives Christians the opportunity to pray for children in today's world who suffer as a result of the actions of adults.

https://christianity.org.uk/christmas-throughout-the-christian-world/#.W9LI_xNKhsM



He was a careful driver during the Christmas period. At the railway crossing he stopped, looked and listened. All he heard was the car behind him, smashing into his boot.

Wordsearch

f	q	z	u	c	s	d	k	w	v	o	n	o
j	f	t	m	d	n	r	t	g	o	d	c	l
p	r	o	p	h	e	t	h	a	f	r	v	f
p	r	a	y	i	n	g	n	s	f	i	l	q
l	w	a	i	t	i	n	g	a	e	s	j	d
a	i	t	i	b	a	b	y	v	r	r	e	n
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n	u	p	e	o	p	l	e	a	d	e	r	c
a	j	h	p	i	n	c	o	u	p	l	e	e

Temple
praised
peace
Jesus
Anna
Israel

baby
offerings
inside
everyone
people
Saviour

Anna
prophet
couple
God
Joseph
leader

family
lifetime
Mary
praying
waiting
world

The teacher asked her Sunday School class to draw a picture of a Bible story with a Christmas theme. She was puzzled by Kate's picture, which showed four people on an airplane. She asked her which story it was meant to represent. 'The Flight to Egypt,' was the reply.

Pointing at each figure, the teacher ventured: 'That must be Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus. But who's the fourth person?'

'Oh,' explained Kate happily, 'that's Pontius - the pilot!'

The following article, by the Revd Peter Crumpler, a Church of England priest in St Albans, Herts, has been extracted from Parish Pump, and considers a new response to a yearly complaint.

Christmas can't come too early

Every year it happens. I hear Christians lamenting how 'Christmas comes earlier every year.'

Since this September (or before!) supermarkets, shops and garden centres have been selling Christmas jumpers, socks and pyjamas and all kinds of other seasonal merchandise. Should we be annoyed or exasperated? Should we have gone around reminding people that it's much too early for tinsel and mistletoe?

This year, of all years, the answer from churches and Christians of all denominations must surely be a resounding 'NO.'

As people began looking to Christmas for some light in the gloom of the pandemic – and hard-hit businesses desperately need to increase their income and chances of survival – it sounds a woefully wrong note if the Church is saying 'hold back, it's not time yet...'

Because Christmas is that time of year when increasing numbers of people want to come to church services and share in the story of the new-born King. It is when carols are played in shopping centres, and there are openings to speak of the meaning of the season.

Churches might not be able to host big indoor carol services this year, but the challenge is how we take the Christmas message out into the streets and neighbourhoods around our buildings.

This year has been one like no other for millions of people, with little prospect of better news into the New Year. So we need to be declaring the Christmas

message of hope and light and joy in the darkness. And to be doing so at every opportunity.

But also, we need to be doing so with sensitivity and care, for the many who will find it hard to be celebrating this pandemic year, and with the prospect of large family gatherings in doubt because of Covid 19 regulations.

Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell wrote in his 2009 book 'Do Nothing Christmas is Coming', "Christmas is one of the most joyful times of the year. It is also one of the most stressful. It is laden with expectations. It is often overtaken with grief. It might be the season of good will, but it can feel like the last straw on an already overburdened camel." He added ruefully, "Wise men would not ride this one."

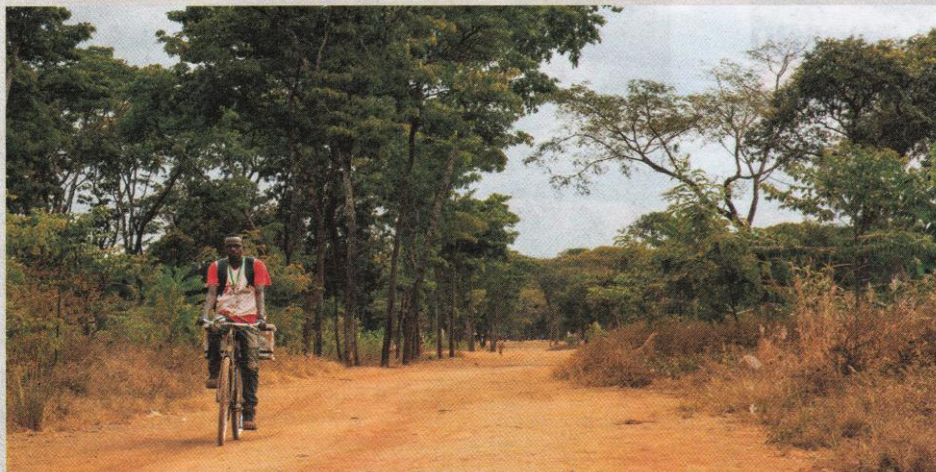
Archbishop Cottrell is right that Christmas has to be approached sensitively, that we need to take care in how we celebrate, that for many people who have lost loved ones and livelihoods during this traumatic year, Christmas will not be easy.

We come alongside people with the news that the baby born in the manger grew up to be the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, who experienced suffering and bereavement. God, born as Man, who shared our pain as well as our celebrations, ultimately died on a cross to rise again.

Our mission is to bring a message of hope, and to do so with love, humility and sensitivity to a hurting disorientated world – one that's eager for light in the gloom.



'No one chooses to be a refugee'



Barthelemy, from Burundi, is an MSF supply manager in Nduta camp, Tanzania, where MSF is the sole provider of medical care for 75,000 refugees. As a refugee himself, Barthelemy embarked on an extraordinary journey to reach safety...

When I think of my hometown, I remember warm days, cycling by the golden shore of Lake Tanganyika, where hippos peek from the surface and children play in the water at sunset. I remember the bright garments of friends gathering by the church and the echo of the pastor's voice. I remember the day I graduated from university: my girlfriend's proud face, the dimples in her cheeks, and I remember being happy.

But it's painful for me to remember the day I left it all behind in 2015. The previous days were scattered with gunfire and explosions. Things in my country were changing. One evening, two men with guns broke into my home and forced me down onto my stomach, threatening to shoot me as they stole my possessions.

Violence erupted around my home every day.

I knew I had to leave, though I didn't want to desert my family and my home. As I kissed my girlfriend goodbye, I felt tears on her eyelashes. 'I don't know where I'm going, but I will write to you when I get there,' I promised.

I set off on my bicycle, carrying a backpack with some clothes, my Bible, a mobile phone and about US\$80 in my pocket. I cycled for hours, hiding behind buildings and trees when I heard gunfire. I rode through bustling towns where fighting chimed like church bells; I cycled up through the clear air of mountain tops and hitched rides on trucks. After five days, I crossed the Tanzanian border. My clothes were wet and my face sagged with fatigue. My life as a refugee had begun.

SHIVERING FROM THE DAMP

At first I stayed with 20 men in a hall in a transit centre. We slept on mats on the mud floor and ate maize diluted with water. After a week, I was transferred to Nyarugusu camp, home to 150,000 refugees.

When I arrived, all I could see was a sea of mud and white plastic sheeting. I shared my tent with six men, sleeping on a mat, fully clothed and shivering from the damp. The rain leaked through the plastic and soon there were lice everywhere: in my hair, in my clothes, in the bedding.

I WAS NOT ALONE

I was lonesome at first, but the other men gave me energy. I realised I wasn't alone and that many of my brothers here had suffered more than me. We stuck together – not as refugees, but as human beings.

After some months, I was transferred to a camp called Nduta. I went from sleeping under plastic sheeting to eventually building my own home from wood and mud. Together with the members of the local congregation, we also built a new church. I soon got a job with MSF as a supply manager. At MSF, I work with doctors, nurses and engineers from all over the world, and feel a great sense of belonging. We provide lifesaving treatment for malaria, measles, and many other life-threatening problems that people suffer here.

In 2016 my girlfriend left Burundi to embark on the same journey and we were finally reunited. After a year fearing for each other's lives, we were married in the church in the camp, and today we have a baby boy named GoodLuck Tena.

WE ARE HUMANS JUST LIKE YOU

I have lived as a refugee for five years in Tanzania and all I ask is: please, don't judge us because we are refugees. What happened to us can happen to anyone. No one chooses to be a refugee.


I hope that one day I will be able to return to my motherland. One day, I will build my own home and once more I will cycle along the shoreline of Lake Tanganyika at sunset, with my son and wife beside me."

Surname has been removed to protect Barthelemy's identity.

MSF health worker Sosthene Arakaza cycles around Nduta camp installing mosquito traps to control malaria. Photograph © Ellie Kealey/MSF

Love builds hope this Christmas

Hope for a better future is the greatest gift we can give this season.



Mekonnen kneels in the dry sand of the riverbed in Ethiopia, digging with his hands in search of water: 'We pray for rain,' he says, 'but when there is no rain we have to dig.'

Mekonnen is thirsty and desperate with the dry hole more than a metre deep. He knows that if he does not strike water today, even more of his livestock may die. His way of life as a pastoralist herdsman will not last much longer in these conditions.

We don't want to tell you another story about crisis. We want to look towards Christmas and the new year with hope.

But in Ethiopia, and around the world, our neighbours face another devastating crisis that we simply can't ignore – the climate crisis.

The effects of climate change are real for Mekonnen and his family. The rains have stopped, drought has dried the rivers, and crops no longer produce a harvest. Even the honey bees have disappeared.

This year we learned that we can face a global crisis together. Now, we need to stand united with our global neighbours battling the effects of the climate crisis.

With your support, we can bring hope this Christmas to communities like Mekonnen's. Your gifts can help build resilience through reliable water sources and seeds that grow in drought.

Our traditions may look different in this year of social distance, yet love is never distant.

Give hope this Christmas and help a community like Mekonnen's fight the climate crisis.

**Stand in solidarity and hope with
neighbours like Mekonnen this Christmas.**

**Go to caid.org.uk/christmas to donate
and find out more.**