

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)

April & May 2024

4 Welch Way Witney Oxon OX28 6JF
Tel: 01993 709992

www.witneycongregational.org.uk
Office: witneycongooffice@gmail.com



We are now a third of the way into the year – April already, and May won't be far behind! During the last week in March, we have already celebrated some noticeable dates: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and then on Easter Sunday, the joy of resurrection. So, let us not forget the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice made for us all on the cross. Turning now to May there are more significant events; the Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday



I now turn to some of this month's contents: along with the standard contributions, Lesley Barter writes about evangelism; Tony Houghton gives us an expansion on the book of Revelation; David Kinchin gives us an update on Lend with Care and Church windows and some articles have been extracted from Parish Pump, and the CF Series 'A secluded place, 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 3-monthly Summer edition, covering June, July & August is due on **Sunday 2nd June**

Your Editor



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April & May 2024 Diary

Services: 10.30am weekly & 6.00pm on first Sunday of the month

April

7th	am	Rev Judi Holloway	
	pm	Rev Judi Holloway	Communion
14th	am	Rev Elaine Kinchin	
21st	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	Communion
28th	am	Rev Judi Holloway	

May

4th	11.00am	Saturday Praise	
5th	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	
3.30pm		Hi 5s Café Church	Rev Elaine Kinchin Communion
12th	am	Rev Judi Holloway	
19th	am	Rev Elaine Kinchin	Communion
26th	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	

June

1st	11.00am	Saturday Praise	
2nd	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	
	pm	Rev Bryan Doyle	Communion
9th	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	

The following events are given for your particular attention:

April

9th	Chair-based Exercise Class & repeated on 16th, 23rd & 30th	11.00 – 11.45am
12th	Quiz in aid of Witney Foodbank	Friday 6.00pm
27th	Witney Book Circle	10.30am

May

5th	Hi 5s Café Church Cream Tea	Sunday 3.30pm
7th	Lite Bite piece of the Word	12.15pm
28th	Chair-based Exercise Class	11.00 – 11.45am
25th	Witney Book Circle	10.30am

June

4th	Lite Bite piece of the Word	12.15
5th	Hi 5's Pizza with visitors	Wednesday 6.00pm

Rotas

WELCOMING TEAM

April	07	Pat Smith
	14	Lesley Barter
	21	Jean Hodgson
	28	Jacqui Powlesland
May	05	Janet Hayes
	12	Pat Smith
	19	Lesley Barter
	26	Jean Hodgson
	June	02
	09	Janet Hayes



FLOWERS

April	07	Judi Holloway
	14	Rita Hayes
	21	Janet Hayes
	28	Jacqui Powlesland
May	05	Judi Holloway
	12	Rita Hayes
	19	Janet Hayes
	26	Jacqui Powlesland
June	02	Judi Holloway
	09	Rita Hayes



SUNDAY COFFEE

April	07	Sue Birdseye & Claire Woodward
	14	Jean Hodgson & Ann Clack
	21	Pat Smith
	28	Elaine Kinchin & Heather Houghton
May	05	Jacqui & Terry Powlesland
	12	Jean Hodgson & Ann Clack
	19	Pat Smith
	26	Elaine Kinchin & Heather Houghton
June	02	Sue Birdseye & Claire Woodward
	09	Jacqui & Terry Powlesland



THURSDAY COFFEE (10 – 12)

April	11	Ann Clack
	18	Jean Hodgson
	25	David Kinchin
May	02	Pat Smith
	09	Judi Holloway
	16	Ann Clack
	23	David Kinchin
	30	Jean Hodgson
June	06	Pat Smith
	13	Judi Holloway



Nanna Blackman as standby - We would be extremely grateful for other people to join

SOUND SYSTEM

April	07	Terry Powlesland
	14	Tony Houghton
	21	Nanna Blackman
	28	Tony Houghton
May	05	Terry Powlesland
	12	Tony Houghton
	19	Nanna Blackman
	26	Tony Houghton
June	02	Terry Powlesland
	09	Terry Powlesland



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

Apr 07 Hazel Woodward
 12 Andrew MacLarty
 23 Jo Rudd
 26 Joyce Kearsey
 28 Tony Houghton



May 04 Graham Beechey
 11 David Climie
 12 Pearl Barrington
 16 Jean Stanley
 21 Terry Powlesland
 23 Usha Reifsnider
 24 Pip Cartwright
 30 Pat Smith

Prove it

Prove it they cried, that You're the Messiah
 Wouldn't He come as a conquering king?
 Not as a poor man riding a donkey
 How do you think we'd believe such a thing?

Wherever He went large crowds would follow,
 He calmed the storm and turned water to wine,
 The lame could walk and the deaf made to hear,
 Fully a man and yet also divine.

His teaching had never been heard before,
 He fed the five thousand with fish and bread
 Gave sight to the blind and lepers were healed,
 He cast out demons and raised the dead.

He died on a cross to take away sin
 Rose up from the grave, what more could He do?

To prove of His love for all of mankind
 Believe it or not it, it's all up to you.

Megan Carter

A poetic prayer for Pentecost

Happy Birthday to all Christians,
 This is where it all began;
 Out from here went the apostles,
 Taking Christ to everyone.

Able now to speak to nations,
 With the good news to proclaim;
 Crucified for our salvation,
 Hear His message, learn His name.

Out they went to every corner,
 Fearless as they spread the word;
 Bringing light to those in darkness,
 Giving hope to all that heard.

So must we with every blessing,
 Follow in the steps they trod;
 Showing love and help and kindness,
 All come from the breath of God

Alan Millichip

Witney Congregational Church



LITE BITE
 and a piece of the Word



1st Tuesday of the Month
 12.15pm – 1.30pm

In the lounge at
 Witney Congregational Church

A friendly informal light lunch
 Share friendship, conversation,
 food and explore
 a short passage of the Bible
 all sat round one table

Minister's Letter

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We've just put our clocks forward – a sign that things are a changing! Indeed, we're in the throws of replacing Winter with Spring, when the rather short, cold and dreary days will be a thing of the past, temporarily, and we'll soon be enjoying longer, warmer and brighter days.

Our lifestyle is also quite dramatically altered, from being indoor-centric, with many hours spent under wraps and enjoying indoor games and activities, to venturing outdoors to play sports, enjoy walks and exercise those green fingers in the garden.

For many, this transition from Winter to Spring, is exhilarating and energising – it's as though life's landscape is suddenly widened and brightened, and instead of dreading the next gloomy winter's day, people look forward to the next warm and sunny day, where the sun seems to give abundant energy to all!

There's an amazing parallel to this in the Bible – it's the transition from Jesus in the tomb (representing the dark and cold of Winter), to the resurrected Christ (representing the warmth and light of Spring). The disciples were huddled behind closed doors, fearful, after Jesus' death – that's when He was in the tomb. After He appeared to them in His resurrection body, they were radically energised. Here's one example as per John 21:3-8, an account of the disciples fishing. The disciples went out and caught nothing that night – they must have been exhausted and probably disillusioned at the prospect of not catching any fish! However, early in the morning, Jesus, whom they did not recognise, standing on the shore, said to them, "Throw your nets on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from the shore, about a hundred yards."

Peter wasn't avoiding the hard work of getting the boat and catch to the shore, he was genuinely so excited to see Jesus, and simply jumped overboard to get to Him as quickly as he could!

We've just celebrated Easter and declared "He is risen!!!"

Jesus isn't dead, He's alive!!!

How has the truth of that miracle impacted you, because it is through His resurrection that He conquered death, and offers the gift of eternal life? Has Jesus risen afresh in your soul and filled you with His love, joy and peace, has He broadened and enriched your life's landscape with hope and light?

Easter has passed, and just as our earthly seasons come and go, so too, our spiritual journey continues, season by season. Very soon, we'll be celebrating Pentecost, when we remember the wonder of God pouring out His Holy Spirit on all believers! It is the Holy Spirit that teaches us all truth, empowers us to live our lives as Christ followers, leads and guides us, and lives in us, moment by moment.

What an awesome God we have!

Let us continue our journey together, hand in hand, as children of love, light and hope, and follow Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd, along the road He has set us to walk with Him.

Your brother in Christ,
Bryan



PRAYER LETTER No 212

Sometimes, before we can settle into prayer, we might like to make ourselves comfortable: sitting with a notepad to hand, a drink, mobile phone on the other side of the room (!) But there are times when we need to get our mood right. Reading the Bible, a portion of Gospel or a psalm or two is the best plan but other resources are available and helpful.

The *Footprints* poem by Margaret Fishback Powers has stood the test of time:

One night I dreamed a dream. I was walking along the beach with my Lord,
Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.
In each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,
After the last scene of my life flashed before me,
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.
I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,
especially at the very lowest and saddest times, there was only one set of footprints.
This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.
"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you, You'd walk with me all the way.
But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,
there was only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."
He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you.
During your trials and sufferings.
When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

I have found the following poem very helpful, particularly in tough times:

My life is but a weaving between my God and me.
I cannot choose the colours he weaves steadily.
Oft times He weaves sorrow; and I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper and I the underside.
Not 'til the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas and reveal the reason why
The dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skilful hand
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned. Author unknown.

I hope one of these will help you to communicate better with God and if you have another poem that aids your prayer life or explains how the ways of God and humans differ – send it to Terry to include in the next magazine!

I feel the need to quote something I learned fifty years ago from a poem by A. E. Housman: "... malt does more than Milton can to justify God's ways to man". Or, more up to date, Rowan Atkinson in the film *Keeping Mum* says: God is mysterious, deal with it! Why are these quotations important? Because we can only understand God more by getting closer to him: by reading and studying the Bible, and communicating through prayer.

In our list of prayer chain requests recently, we have prayed for new-born babies, young children, teenagers, those of working age and the elderly nearing death; those anxious about hospital tests, those in our fellowship and those in other countries. As Bryan reminded us at church meeting, when a request comes through, if you possibly can, pause and pray

straightaway. There are almost thirty of us on the prayer chain, so it is not necessary to comment on every request – the important thing is to PRAY.

Every Blessing, Elaine

Please note that for up-to-date prayer requests contact Elaine 07534 879449)

The following article written by Dr Ruth M Bancewicz, who is Church Engagement Director at The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge, has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

Finding Expression – and God’s Response – in Lament

The question of suffering comes up regularly in discussions about science and faith. I once visited a school to speak to some of the older teenagers. One of the pupils had sadly passed away from cancer a few weeks before and his classmates asked, “How could God let this happen?” Of course, these young people’s questions about where God was in this situation were important. But the chaplain also gently reminded the class that their friend’s family were Christians, and that they were finding that their experience of loss had brought them even closer to God than before.

One way that grief can bring us near to God is when we share it with Him, telling Him exactly how we feel. The biblical writers had no scruples about expressing themselves to God, giving vent to emotions we often hold back in a church context. As my colleague Roger Abbott has written in his book on *‘Unanswered’ Prayer*, “Let us not confuse reverence with spiritual prudishness. Perhaps honesty, the way it feels, is precisely what God is waiting to hear from us.”

About one third of the Psalms express some form of grief. The book of Job is a series of responses to one man’s suffering as he loses his children, property and health in quick succession. Lamentations is also one long outpouring of sadness at what happened to Israel under the Babylonians. Some of the prophets, especially Jeremiah, also express their pain at these sort of events – which reflect something of God’s own feelings at the suffering of His people.

Most of these biblical authors would have had access to Scriptures that encouraged them to turn to God whatever the circumstances. Emboldened by their knowledge of His character and promises, these divinely inspired writers even express their anger to God about the things He lets happen, or complain that He seems to act unfairly or ignore them in their plight. Not only do these people let out all their feelings without fear of reprisal, but they also clearly expect a helpful answer. Some record a resolution to their troubles – often simply because God speaks to and comforts them, enabling them to keep going.

The biblical writers demonstrated that God can handle pretty much anything – anger, blame, bitterness – if we are actively looking to Him for help. As Pete Greig of the 24-7 prayer movement has written, “pain that is not expressed can never be transformed”.

The following article has been written, and submitted, by Lesley Barter, and is entitled:

Talking about Evangelism

If ever there was a season to be concentrating on spreading the word of Jesus Christ, this is it. In the period after the Resurrection, the Disciples were caught like rabbits in the headlights, not understanding what to make of their Master's death and subsequent re-appearance. He had made it clear that he was not about to resume his ministry on earth. He passed the baton to his followers to spread the word far and wide. This was a tall order considering that they were a motley crew of people from (mostly) ordinary walks of life; not great orators or people in influential positions. But they rose to the challenge and it is thanks to them that we are able to sign up to the Christian faith today.

Nothing has changed. As committed Christians, our remit is to continue this work but, like them, we feel ill-equipped to do so. And anyway, it is way outside our comfort zone. Bryan has outlined his vision for our church, and it is not just a cosy walk into retirement as we all gradually potter off to heaven. He sees young families regenerating our church and breathing life into our Christian mission. Deep down we all know that this makes sense, but we recoil at the prospect of preaching on street corners and knocking on doors. This is NOT who we are, and anyway, Witney people are unlikely to be converted by door stepping them.

So how do we fulfil our duty as practising Christians, to spread the Gospel of Christ? We are not all called to shout about it, but we are all given talents and it really is our

duty to use them to further our message. The way we live and the way we treat other people speaks louder than words. So often our faith is just the stronghold that we shelter in when life gets tough but there should be an inner joy in ALL that we do. God reveals Himself in every act of kindness, every piece of beautiful music or art; even every delicious meal.

Throughout the bible we hear that God has chosen the least obvious people to further His plans. God was not in the wind or the earthquake – He was in a still, small voice. We can all manage to be a still small voice. Our faith makes us who we are - let's try hard to be out and proud. God will do the rest.



The following article has been written and submitted by Claire Woodward, and is about her grandmother, and is entitled:

Renee Woodward

Renee, who was 106 on 6th April, grew up in the East End of London. She is the youngest of fourteen during WW2 and she used her tailoring skills, and made clothes for Winston Churchill and Twiggy.

Renee has always been devoted to her four grandchildren and four great grandchildren. They were fortunate to have her always living nearby. The family have so many happy memories of time spent in her company. Her warmth and giving nature shine through undaunted

The following article has been written and submitted by David Kinchin, our Church Treasurer, and is entitled:

Lend With Care (Care International)

Further to the Church Meeting at the end of March people have been asking for a few more details about our Lend-with-care programme. So here we are.

Currently we have 98 different loans offered within the following nations:



Malawi	(31)
Ecuador	(18)
Nicaragua	(2)
Cambodia	(8)
Philippines	(10)
Vietnam	(3)
Pakistan	(2)
Zambia	(5)
Thailand	6)
Palestinian Territory	(2)
Togo	(3)
Peru	(3)
Rwanda	(5)

So we really have a very international feel to our sharing of these loans to people. The picture shows a group of five ladies in Gamba Village, Malawi. They have opened a shop selling clothes and groceries. It is the only shop for miles around them. They asked the organisation for £551 over a period of seven months. Our church lent just £15 of that total sum.



This is Zeniada, and she is a pig farmer in the Philippines who requested £1,090 from LWC. Again, we lent her £15 to develop her work.

So, our risks are very small – usually just £15 – but these entrepreneurs are taking much bigger risks in order to develop a family business or a local cooperative venture.

We made our first loans in February 2018 – when the world was a very different place and nobody had heard of Covid 19. During those six years the church has made a total of 483 loans and in only 17 cases have people defaulted on the loan - that is one defaulter for every 28 loans. So, there are risks involved. However, we have given employment to almost 900 people and helped over 8,200 family members. It is just amazing what we can do with just £15 at a time.

If you wish to contribute towards our next series of loans (usually made on the last week of each month, then just put money in an envelop and either give it to David or place it in the donations box in the church entrance – marking it “LWC” – and I will make sure it is included in our next batch of loans.

The following article, written by Harry Booton, has been extracted, with permission, from CF series 'A Secluded Place' and is entitled:

Set an example

I recently went on a school trip to the WW1 battlefields of Belgium and France. Over the 4 days, I saw roughly 15,000 graves and 150,000 names on walls – the names of those whose bodies were never found or could not be identified. It was a truly harrowing sight, especially at Tyne Cot, where there are 12,000 graves and 35,000 names on the walls. And yet, seeing all this death and suffering wasn't the most shocking thing on the trip, for me at least. For me, the most shocking thing was that, confronted with all this sacrifice, all this history, that people on the trip, young people of the same age as me, could turn round and say they were bored.

At first I was apoplectic. How could they possibly be bored? How, when faced with a field full of 12,000 graves, when walking through a carefully preserved trench, when surrounded by a wonderfully curated museum, could they possibly be bored? But then I stopped myself and thought about why I was so interested. As far as I know, I don't have any relatives that lost their lives in WW1. I've always been fascinated with history, partly because both my parents are. So, I thought about it as we took the 8-hour journey home. Once I'd got past the reaction of wanting to lamp those who said they were bored, I realised that we could draw some interesting parallels between that trip and what is happening with young people in churches of all denominations.

For many young people, their only experiences of church, if they don't come from a faith background, will be school assemblies at Easter, Harvest and Christmas where usually the whole school will troop

into the local church – usually a CofE church, take from that what you will. They are made to sing a couple of hymns, get Bible-bashed with a sermon they don't understand, much less care about and then troop back up to school, usually in the rain/wind/snow. And I know all this because I did the same thing for 7 years when I was at primary school. However, once they leave primary school, secondary and beyond is decidedly agnostic. Aside from RE lessons, religion is rarely brought up and for many children it simply slips off their radar. Once they get to being adults, those dreary services from their childhood may be the thing that prevents them crossing the threshold of the church and rediscovering God in their lives.

So, what can we, as churches, do? Well, if you are a church that hosts schools for their annual events, try and tailor your delivery style. Remember, these are not hardened theologians, these are young children who need a simpler, easily applicable message to take away. Make your churches more inviting. Services do not have to be completely silent affairs; in fact we are told in Psalms 98:4 to 'Make a joyful noise to the Lord' and in this children are the best.

Surely, if we, as Christians, believe that God's word is for anyone who can hear it, it is up to us to step outside our comfort zones, outside what we have been doing previously, in order to engage the generations to come. We need to ask how we can share God's word with people of all ages, in an engaging way that dispels those previous ideas of boredom and irrelevance. We need to challenge the status quo and remember in the words of one of my favourite Bible verses – 1 Timothy 4:12:

'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.'

The following article, written by David Kinchin for The Congregationalist Magazine – Spring 2012, is entitled:

Church Windows at the Seaside

I remember as an eleven-year-old child being totally speechless at the sight of a particular stained-glass window – I was at Wells Cathedral. Then some twenty years later I was able to see the rose window at Notre Dame in Paris and I felt that very same feeling. Quite recently, I had the opportunity to visit a Federation church and found the windows there to be simply breathtaking.

I am talking about the ‘sculptured bronze’ windows of Blackpool Victoria church. This is quite a new building built approximately twenty years ago, which contains three stained glass windows and a further six etched windows. What makes these windows all the more impressive to me is the fact that they were designed by a church member. Suzy Doughty was the head of art at the sixth-form college in Bispham, Blackpool. She designed all six of these windows, five of which are on the south wall of the church with the other on the north wall.

The sculptured windows depict the following:

- The creation of the world
- The creation of the natural world
- The nativity – Man, a child in the hand of God



- The hands of the compassionate Christ
- Man regenerated
- The Arts and Science – symbols for sixteen disciplines, including the space shuttle.

Photographs do not really do justice to these windows but I have tried to show these to the best of my ability. However, next time you are in Blackpool on a bright sunny day, call in at Victoria church and see these magnificent windows for yourself.

I have since discovered that the church was opened on 15th July 1990, a date very significant in my own life and an interesting coincidence of fate.

The following article has been written and submitted by Tony Houghton, and is entitled:

Jesus' letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation

I was blessed by the study notes prepared by Bryan and was looking at them when we were away at our daughter's and son-in-law's house. Chloe had an ESV study Bible in which I found this excellent summary table. I thought we might all find it useful.

Church	Description of Christ	Commendation	Rebuke	Solution	Consequence of Disobedience	Promise for Conquerors
Ephesus (2:1-7)	holds the seven stars in his right hand; walks among the seven golden lamp stands	doctrinal vigilance and endurance	loss of first love	remember, repent, and do the works done at first	removal of their lamp stand	will be given the tree of life in paradise to eat
Smyrna (2:8-11)	the first and the last, who died and came to life	spiritually rich, enduring persecution	—	be faithful unto death	—	will be given the crown of life and will not be hurt by the second death
Pergamum (2:12-17)	has the sharp two-edged sword	holding fast Christ's name, not denying their faith	false teaching	repent	war against them with the sword of Christ's mouth	will be given hidden manna and a white stone with a new name on it
Thyatira (2:18-29)	has eyes like a flame of fire, feet like burnished bronze	growing love, evidenced in deeds of service	lack of discernment; toleration of heresy	hold fast and keep Christ's works till the end	each given as their works deserve	will be given the morning star and authority over the nations
Sardis (3:1-6)	has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars	a few remain pure and loyal	dead works	keep the Word and repent	Christ will come like a thief	will be clothed in white garments; name never blotted out of the book of life; name confessed before God and angels
Philadelphia (3:7-13)	the holy one, the true one, who has the keys of David	patiently enduring, keeping God's word and not denying his name	—	hold fast what you have	—	will be made a pillar in the temple of God, inscribed with the names of God, the new Jerusalem, and Christ
Laodicea (3:14-22)	the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation	—	spiritually blind, bankrupt, naked, lukewarm	buy gold, white garments, and salve from Christ; be zealous and repent	will be spit out of Christ's mouth	will dine with Christ; will be granted to sit with Christ on his throne

The following article, written by Kathy Shaw, has been extracted, with permission, from CF series 'A Secluded Place' and is entitled:

Are you strolling along the beach, or battling the storm?

Do you like being by the sea? I do, although I don't get to be there very often. Can you visualise the scene? The smell of the sea, and the sounds. There's something very calming about watching the ebb and flow of the tide. I can visualise myself walking along the beach, the sun on my back, stopping to pick up a shell or a pebble that has caught my eye. The sound of the water quietly lapping as it creeps up the beach, coming nearer and nearer, before retreating within itself. The sea can lift my mood in minutes of arriving, whatever mood I have arrived in. The sea can lull us into a sense of wellbeing - a state of freedom and relaxation.

Yet as we know the tide can turn very quickly. Suddenly, without warning, what seemed calm and inviting can become a place of danger. There are often reports of shoreline rescues, when people have gone walking on the beach and have suddenly realised that they have been cut off from the mainland, trapped by the turning tide. Or news of a cliff collapsing, taking with it someone's home, as the sea reclaims the land it sits on. At these times there is an element of fear and a lack of control.

At these times God is not fearful. He is in control of whatever happens next.

"I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Joshua 1:9

A bit like life. All seems to be going well. We think we are in control. Then, like the

sea the tide turns, the weather changes and we find ourselves in choppy waters, even in the middle of a storm. Like life, the sea can change very quickly, becoming a roaring, foaming mass, as it crashes into the rocks, knocking and dragging anything in its wake into itself.

Anyone who has ever struggled with their mental health can probably relate to those descriptions. But when God created the sea, and the weather He was fully aware of the frailties of human life. He warns us that in following Him the way will not be easy. There will be storms as well as the times when we can meander along without a care in the world. He invites us to learn strategies and collect tools to cope when the way isn't easy.

So, are you prepared to make that journey? Have you got the resources and the know how to cope with the ebb and flow of the tide, and the turning of that tide and any storms ahead? Is your prayer life live? Have you put your trust and confidence in God? If you are not ready, what are you doing to prepare yourself for these times?

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Romans 8:38-39

Father, as I walk along the beach, with sand between my toes, help me to enjoy your creation, and to give you thanks. Help me also to prepare for the times when the water is rough. When the water is choppy, When the storm is wild and out of control. Help me to then turn to you in prayer, trusting you and having confidence in your word, throughout my life. Amen.

The following article written by Canon Paul Hardingham, has been extracted from Parish Pump, continues a new series which will run for the next two years.

An Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament: Leviticus & Numbers

These books are concerned with Israel's wandering in the desert, on their journey from slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Canaan.

Leviticus focuses on the regulations about worship, ceremonial cleanness, moral laws and holy days. The key theme is that of holiness, as every detail of our lives is affected by the presence of a holy God. The aim of the sacrifices, feast and Sabbaths was to enable the people to enter God's presence. We should see the instructions and practices in Leviticus as pointing to Jesus. He totally fulfilled the law through the sacrifice of His life, as Easter reminds us. He demonstrated the love and holiness of God, so that we can share His life: 'Be holy, because I am holy' (1 Peter 1:16, cf Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7).

The book of Numbers tells the story of Israel's journey through the wilderness. The people were coming to terms with their identity as God's people and the call to serve Him. They didn't always respond with faith, gratitude and obedience, but with unbelief, ingratitude and rebellion. As a result of their refusal to enter Canaan (ch 14), they were condemned to spend the rest of their lives in the desert. However, God in His grace allowed their children to enter the Promised Land. The book reminds us that the Church is called to be a community that honours God, learns how to deal with sin in ourselves and others, and lives out love and justice in daily life.

'The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.'
(Numbers 6:24-26).



Jesus Is Watching You!

A burglar broke into an old house one night. He shone his torch looking for something to steal. He found an iPad and, just as he was putting it into his sack, he heard a strange disembodied voice in the dark saying: "Jesus is watching you!"

He looked around and, seeing nothing, carried on with his search. He found a camera and again, just as he was putting it in his sack, he heard: "Jesus is watching you!"

He was now becoming more nervous and made a more diligent search for the source of the voice. But he found nothing, put it down to his imagination, and decided to go upstairs to find more loot. He was tucking some diamonds away when he heard, more loudly this time: "Jesus is watching you!"

He rushed to where he had now decided the voice was coming from and threw back a curtain and there he found a parrot saying, of course, "Jesus is watching you!" He said to the parrot, "Who are you?" The parrot replied, "I am called Moses". "Moses! Moses!" cried the burglar, "What sort of person would name a parrot Moses?"

"Well," said the parrot, "the sort of person who calls their 10 stone rottweiler Jesus!"

The following article has been submitted by Nanna Blackman, and was used as her Reflection in the evening service on 3rd March 2024, and is entitled:

Christ Crucified Is God's Power and Wisdom

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Question: What is God's power and wisdom?

Answer: Christ Crucified!

I could end the reflection right there but you would probably feel cheated. So let us unpack this a little. We start with the 'it is written' which quotes part of Isaiah 29:14. If we include verse 13 and the whole of verse 14, it helps to set the scene:

¹³ The Lord says:

“These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their Hearts are far from me.

Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.

¹⁴ Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder;
the wisdom of the wise will perish,
the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”

The message of the cross is foolishness. The cross was an instrument used by the Romans to suppress the people it oppressed. It was an instrument of torture and of humiliation, meant to be a deterrent, not just from breaking the law but also from unrest and rebellion against the Roman occupiers. To use that instrument to manifest God's love is foolishness, is it not? If God wanted to astound us with wonder upon wonder, surely, He would have elevated Jesus in some glorious way, not have him die on a cross like a brigand.

Someone (an American) once asked me if I would wear an image of an electric chair around my neck. To first century folk, the cross would be just such an image. Yet Paul is preaching Christianity to first century Corinth. He is teaching them that by dying on the cross, Jesus has taken their sins upon himself and defeated death, their death. Surely, this is foolishness.

God made the wisdom of the world foolish. Everyone was expecting the Messiah to be powerful, a destroyer of the oppressor, a saviour on an earthly plane. God chose to send His son to walk the earth in meekness, in Healing, in preaching and above all in love, until the moment of His death on a cross. The world, in its wisdom, did not know this was the messiah. In fact, the world gave Him up to be crucified, and it was God's plan all along – Jesus knew this and still He came to reconcile us to His Father. The Messiah's glory was not on the earthly plane, it was on the spiritual plane. The mission was not to defeat the Romans but to defeat evil and death. The mission was not to influence a period in history, however painful that was for God's chosen people. It was to defeat the devil and evil, and sin, which

separates us from God. Jesus came to show us the way, through His actions, His teachings, miracles, parables, and the legacy He passed on to His disciples and the first Christians, ensured that ultimately the Word could spread, reaching even us Here today, in Witney. So that we might believe and be saved.

What about us? We believe ourselves, as folk of the 21st Century, to be quite sophisticated, don't we? Are we the philosophers of this age? The wise? The teachers of the law? Do we know God or do we come near to Him with our mouths and honour Him with our lips, with Hearts that are far from Him? Is our basis for worshipping God human rules that we have been taught, or do we have a real relationship with God the Father through Jesus the Son, with flames fanned by the Holy Spirit? Do we demand signs and look for wisdom, debating finer points of scripture, usually out of context, to show how intellectually clever and accomplished we are? Or do we Hear God's call and realise that God's power and wisdom lies in Christ Crucified.

If we want to see the wonder upon wonder of Jesus walking the earth, living life, inviting us into intimate relationship with His Father and ultimately dying for us, we need to accept the foolishness of the cross. We need to give up our rationalising, stop looking for logical explanations, and merely be astounded by God's love for us.

Do we fully believe that God in His foolishness, wiser than human wisdom, sacrificed His only son on an instrument of torture to defeat evil and death? Do we understand that God's weakness, which is His love for us, means strength far stronger than anything we can possibly imagine? If we can believe those two things, we can stand in the Power and Wisdom of God, Christ Crucified.

Amen

Canon Paul Hardingham considers the Ascension, which this year we commemorate on Thursday 9th May, and is entitled:

The Truth of the Ascension

'While He was blessing them, Jesus left them and was taken up into heaven.' (Luke 24:51).

The Ascension is a hugely neglected festival, which deserves to have a bigger place in our church life. How do we understand it?

The Ascension tells us that Jesus is in control: 'Jesus has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand' (1 Peter 3:22). Jesus occupies the top spot in the universe; the control of our world is in the safe, scarred hands of Jesus. We can offer Him our worship and allegiance, knowing that His plans are better than those of any Prime Minister or President.

The Ascension tells us that God is committed to His world: 'And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus' (Ephesians 2:6). Jesus did not leave His humanity behind when He ascended, for we are raised with Christ to heaven. Therefore, God is bound to His world and we can trust Him to fulfil His purposes for our lives and world.

The Ascension gives us a job to do: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28:18,19). God's way of working in the world is through us. He commissions us for this task at the Ascension and equips us at Pentecost. We are called to make disciples, starting in our workplace, family and community.

'Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which He blesses all the world.' (Teresa of Avila).

