

# 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 2022 & January 2023**



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

[www.witneycongregational.org.uk](http://www.witneycongregational.org.uk)  
Office: [witneycongooffice@gmail.com](mailto:witneycongooffice@gmail.com)



This is the last edition of the magazine for this year, and what a year it has been; when world events continue to impact heavily on our personal lives and our churches.

Recovering from the impact of Covid-19 was hard enough, but with the arrival of the Russian war on Ukraine, worldly finances have received another heavy blow. Many of us now are facing a hard winter, with seemingly little to be cheerful about.

And yet, and yet – the message of Christmas is just as real for us today as it was 2000 years ago, and it can still bring us hope and joy for our long-term future. Emmanuel has come, the Prince of Peace, the Son of Righteousness. God IS with us. And HIS kingdom will have no end.

As stated in the Autumn edition, I hope this edition of the magazine will remind you that you are not forgotten; so, may God bless you and keep you in the months ahead. He alone is our refuge and strength when times get tough.

I now turn to some of this month's contents: along with the standard contributions, now that we have a new Minister, Nanna Blackman gives us the last Deacon's Letter & also the Prayer Letter; there is the continuation of Ken Lee's Bible Study; Pip Cartwright gives us the history of WCC and some 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](mailto:terrypowlesland@uwclub.net)  
[jacquipowlesland@uwclub.net](mailto:jacquipowlesland@uwclub.net)

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

The next 2-monthly edition, covering February & March 2023 is due on **Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> February**

Your Editor

### Visiting Father Christmas

A mother took her young daughter to visit Father Christmas in his grotto at the garden centre. He greeted the youngster merrily and asked: "And what would you like for Christmas?"

The little girl stared at him, open-mouthed with horror. "*Didn't you get my email?!*"



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# December 2022 & January 2023 Diary

## December

4 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Elaine Kinchin	Advent 2
	pm	Rev Elaine Kinchin	
11 <sup>th</sup>	am	David Kinchin	Communion Advent 3
18 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle & Rev Judi Holloway	Advent 4
24 <sup>th</sup>	11.15pm	Rev Bryan Doyle & Rev Jason Cooke	Communion
25 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	

## January

**1<sup>st</sup> No Services**

7 <sup>th</sup>	11.00am	Saturday Praise	
8 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Judi Holloway	
15 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	Communion
22 <sup>nd</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	
29 <sup>th</sup>	am	Dr Gillian Warson	
	3.00pm	Madley Park Residential Home	

## February

4 <sup>th</sup>	11.00am	Saturday Praise	
5 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Elaine Kinchin	
	pm	tba	

The following events are given for your particular attention:

## Dec

5 <sup>th</sup>	Hi 5's Games taster evening	6.00pm	
6 <sup>th</sup>	Lite Bite piece of the Word	12.15pm	
8 <sup>th</sup>	Safe Place and repeated on 15 <sup>th</sup> & 22 <sup>nd</sup>	12.00 – 4.00pm	
	Once Upon a Christmastime – After Soup Lunch		
22 <sup>nd</sup>	Carols & Mince Pies	11.00am	

## Jan

**3<sup>rd</sup> No Lite Bite piece of the Word**

5 <sup>th</sup>	Safe Place and repeated on 12 <sup>th</sup> , 19 <sup>th</sup> & 26 <sup>th</sup>	12.00 – 4.00pm	
	Hi 5's Games Beetle Drive	6.00pm	
28 <sup>th</sup>	Witney Book Circle	10.30am	

## Feb

2 <sup>nd</sup>	Safe Place and repeated on 9 <sup>th</sup>	12.00 – 4.00pm	
5 <sup>th</sup>	Hi 5's Lunch	12.30pm	
7 <sup>th</sup>	Lite Bite piece of the Word	12.15pm	

## Rotas

### WELCOMING TEAM

<b>December</b>	04	Pat Brent
	11	Joan Currie
	18	Jacqui Powlesland
	25	Deacon
<b>January</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>No Services</b>
	08	Lesley Barter
	15	Pat Smith
	22	Janet Hayes
	29	Pat Brent
<b>February</b>	05	Joan Currie



## FLOWERS

<b>December</b>	04	Pat Brent
	11	Christmas Tree
	18	Christmas Tree
	25	Christmas Tree
<b>January</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>No Services</b>
	08	Joan Currie
	15	Janet Hayes
	22	Jacqui Powlesland
	29	Judi Holloway
<b>February</b>	05	Rita Hayes



## SUNDAY COFFEE

<b>December</b>	04	Jean Hodgson & Ann Clack
	11	Welcome Lunch
	18	Pat Smith & Pat Brent
<b>January</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>No Coffee</b>
	<b>01</b>	<b>No Services</b>
	08	Elaine Kinchin & Glen Ryan
	15	Sue Birdseye & Claire Woodward
	22	Jacqui & Terry Powlesland
<b>February</b>	29	Jean Hodgson & Ann Clack
	05	Pat Smith & Pat Brent



<b>THURSDAY COFFEE (10 – 12)</b>		<b>Soup Lunch (12 – 2 &amp; 2 - 4)</b>	
<b>December</b>	08	Judi Holloway	See Rota in kitchen
	15	Elaine Kinchin	
	22	Judi Holloway	
<b>January</b>	05	Pat Smith	
	12	Jean Hodgson	
	19	Ann Clack	
	26	Judi Holloway	
<b>February</b>	02	David Kinchin	
	09	Pat Smith	



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

## SOUND SYSTEM

<b>December</b>	04	Terry Powlesland
	11	Nanna Blackman
	18	Nanna Blackman
	24	Terry Powlesland
	25	Terry Powlesland
<b>January</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>No Services</b>
	08	Terry Powlesland
	15	Nanna Blackman
	22	Terry Powlesland
<b>February</b>	29	Nanna Blackman
	05	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

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



Jan 02 Benjamin Esapa  
 Joseph Esapa  
 Margaret Esapa  
 07 Storm Wallace  
 13 Anthony Beechey  
 15 Ruth Doyle  
 24 David Kinchin

Feb 04 Elaine Beechey  
 08 Pat Brent

## Christmas Quiz 2022

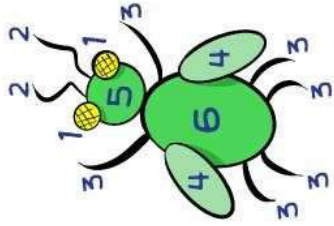










- How did No Vac Novak become No Match Novak?
- 35 years ago ITV wanted a detective story set within 50 miles of the Midlands to rival BBC's Agatha Christie stories. What did they choose?
- Which rock star who died in January and would do anything for love, but not that?
- What unexpected occurrence at the Winter Olympics caused problems in the icy setting?
- He would have celebrated his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in March and was one of a duo who wrote The hippopotamus song mud, mud, glorious mud
- What was the career of the President of Ukraine before he entered politics?
- At the Oscars Will Smith had an incident with the comedian, Chris Rock, What film did Smith go on to get an Oscar for?
- What were the following "gates"? Why are they called "gates"? Partygate - Tractorgate - Beergate
- In May a footballer's shirt was sold for the record breaking £7.1 million. Whose was it?
- What were two places outside the UK that gained city status?
- There was a television series this year called *Infamy*. Which film features the line, "Infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me."?
- A surprise guest of Her Majesty for tea over the Platinum Jubilee was Paddington Bear. Who voiced Paddington in the Ukrainian language version of the film?
- The actor who played the Revd Timothy Farthing passed away this year. What comedy series did he appear in?
- At the age of nearly 90, he published
- an autobiography looking back on his years in show business in 2018. Its title was *Bernard Who? 75 Years Of Doing Absolutely Everything* - and its advice was simple. "Do your best and be grateful for every single job". Who was he?
- Which actress was ordered not to quit a science fiction series by Martin Luther King?
- Where did Dan Snow reportedly urge tourists to visit instead of (or possibly as well as) Stonehenge?

*Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and a*





2023 Hi 5's Plan – 5<sup>th</sup> of every month

<p><b>January</b> <b>Thursday at 6pm</b></p>  <p><b>Beetle Drive</b></p>	<p><b>February</b> <b>Sunday at 12:30pm</b></p>  <p><b>Lunch</b></p>	<p><b>March</b> <b>Sunday at 3:30pm</b></p>  <p><b>Café Church</b></p>
<p><b>April</b> <b>Wednesday at 6pm</b></p>  <p><b>Music Night</b></p>	<p><b>May</b> <b>Friday at 6pm</b></p>   <p><b>Memories &amp; puddings</b></p>	<p><b>June</b> <b>Monday at 6pm</b></p>  <p><b>Charades with a twist</b></p>
<p><b>July</b> <b>Wednesday at 6pm</b></p>  <p><b>Treasure Hunt</b></p>	<p><b>August</b> <b>Saturday at 12:30pm</b></p>   <p><b>Barbecue &amp; games</b></p>	<p><b>September</b> <b>Tuesday at 6pm</b></p>  <p><b>Film Night</b></p>

## Deacons' letter

Dear Friends

We are now truly in Advent, travelling towards the winter solstice, the shortest day, and out into lengthening daylight hours.



As Christians, we are also travelling towards the time to celebrate the arrival of the Light of the World, Jesus, God come to earth in the form of a baby. This is a time of excitement, anticipation and festivity. It is also a time of reflection, quiet time by candlelight in the darkness, a time to wonder at the momentousness of that event.

Jesus was born, God in human form, to teach and guide us, ultimately to die on the cross as my Saviour, the Saviour of all.

The Church has a very special part in the run up to Christmas; that of reminding ourselves, each other and all around us that it is not really about the tinsel, the turkey and the presents. How well we do this is dependent on the solidity of our faith, which in turn relies on being anchored in the Bible, prayer and fellowship. In everything, we must look to God for guidance and support. In the words of Graham Adams [from URC Prayer Handbook 2015]

Restore me, O God, and restore us all.

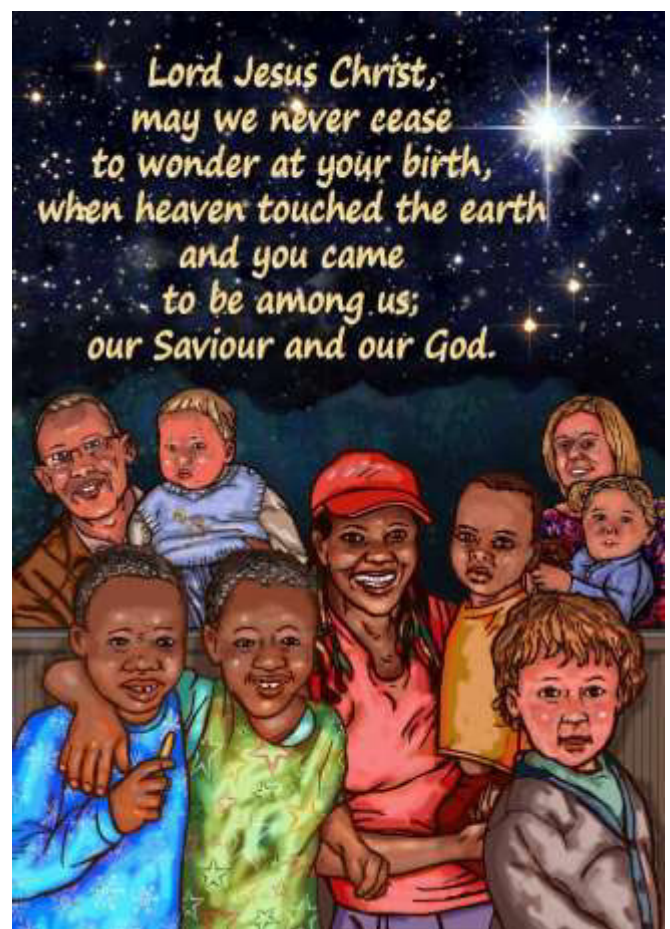
Let your advent among us encourage us to embody our faith in you, to turn our sin-offerings

and sacrifices into lives of justice and loving kindness as we walk humbly with you.

Living God, teach us to love.

Beyond the joy and magic of Christmas lies the hope and promise of the New Year. We are blessed that our new Minister Bryan and his wife Ruth are joining us already now, in December. As we all get to know each other better and start to work together in our Church and in our community, it is a time of possibility and opportunity. We have already been able to expand our activities, post-pandemic, and are seeing our church community growing and sharing. Thus, we look to the future with eagerness. Always seeking God's will and wisdom in all that we do.

Wishing you a blessed Christmas and a Christ centred 2023





## PRAYER LETTER No 205

We have recently been joined in Witney by a number of asylum seekers, housed in the Witney Hotel by the Home Office. It is a testament to the faith communities in Witney that they responded promptly with practical help, such as appealing for clothes and toys. The immediate needs were met within a very short space of time, a witness to the generosity of the folks of Witney. However, in the long term, it is not only about arms-length donations but also about how we welcome a number of families and individuals into our community, into our churches and into our lives. Language is likely to be a barrier as is culture. Let us pray to God for guidance, humility and courage as well as compassion and generosity. At this time when we anticipate the birth of Christ, celebrate His time on earth and learn again the teachings of the Gospels, let us turn to God:

### **Loving God**

We confess that we are not ready for strangers in our midst.

We are uncomfortable, shy and timid, a little afraid of challenges they might bring to our lives.

Let us remember that Jesus too was a refugee as a child, and must have felt the upheaval as these children do.

Let us remember that no one chooses to leave country and home behind, without compelling cause.

Whether Christian or other faith or no faith, show us how to welcome all as our Sisters and Brothers.

### **Servant God**

We confess we are not ready to serve those with whom we are unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

Jesus washed the feet of his disciples; we are not ready to clean away the messiness of displacement.

Jesus had compassion for all, the unclean and the lame, help us to lend an ear and wipe away the tear of the homesick.

The Holy Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak all languages, may the Holy Spirit give us language to understand enough to give support.

### **Loving God**

You know our fears and weaknesses, forgive our hesitancy to welcome the stranger.

Give us the courage to show your love, to be the love in action people you have called us to be.

Amen

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





The following article, with permission, has been extracted from Congregational Federation Life-Light 2022, and is entitled:

## **Hope grows - "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies."**

1 Corinthians 15:36



My daughter Emily moved to Clydebank not long after my husband died. At the age of 57 he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Where was the hope in that? He wanted to move home to Scotland, and we got him home in August 2018, he passed away in January 2019. We got the call at 5am to come to the Hospice, every traffic light on the way was red and when we got there the gates were locked! They never lock the gates, so Emily had to climb over the fence and get them to let me in. We were 5 minutes too late! Iain was at peace, it was tough for us, but Iain had hope, he knew where he was going because of a seed that God had sown in him - Jesus.

Emily moved into one of the only blocks of flats left standing in Clydebank after the Blitz in the Second World War. At the back is a high wall left from back then and in a hole in the wall grew a seed - hope.

As I sit watching the news on a dark rainy day, the Government is in disarray, churches are being accused of child abuse and there is war in Ukraine (and other areas). There doesn't seem to be much hope in the world. It must have felt like that for the Jewish people too. Despite God promising them hope, they couldn't see it. Plagues, war, religious disagreement - sound familiar? They couldn't keep their eyes fixed on God and easily forgot. But human beings are like that, fickle and shallow, and God knows that he created us. We are the seeds he has sown.

I think if we had got to Iain in time he wouldn't have gone as peacefully. Sister Anne was at his side praying, but he didn't need to panic. Yes, I'm sad that Iain isn't here but the seeds he planted are being nurtured by Jesus. After being a carer for over 20 years I can now grow and despite having my own cancer scare this year I have never lost hope. I need to tell people my story. I paddleboard, I cycle, I swim, and I walk Iain's dog in God's amazing creation. This inspires me in my work as an Online Pastor for Haymills Congregational Church and my lay preaching locally.

1 Corinthians 15:55 says: "Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?"

Just look again at the picture, new life has sprung up, that small seed that God has sown.

Sarah McGrory

The following article, written & submitted by Pip Cartwright, was correct when first published in July 2006, and corrections have been made since then, and is a continuation from the last edition, and is entitled:

## **History of WCC: 1979 -1984**

The Church had a new building (Field House) and a new Minister but we also had a big debt. Having got planning permission for the development of our corner site (between High Street and Welch Way) in March 1979 the Deacons and Trustees met up with Mr Mark Baker of Wilsons to discuss its development and thus reduce our debt. The Halifax Building Society showed great interest in this prime site and it was eventually agreed that they should lease the site (99 year lease) and build offices. The plans were approved by the Council on the proviso that a car park was also provided. Thus building commenced and the Halifax started trading during 1980/1981.

Although the rents (£4,600) would help reduce our debt we couldn't expect to get an acceptable rent increase in the old High Street site until 1985. With a new young active Minister at our helm the Church began to grow in numbers. We had a good core of young people (20 in the YPF and 15 in Pilots) and a number of young families joined the Church. One new family wrote in the Church Magazine explaining why they found the church attractive. They were "struck by the proportion of young people and their participation in the Church Service and found the liveliness and friendliness of the church compelling to outsiders". They concluded by saying that "a practical, down to earth Christianity is alive and well in Witney".

Giving increased and George Howell encouraged tax paying members to enhance their giving by making a 'Deed of

Covenant'. (Tax in 1981 was 30%). As the church grew, we needed more chairs and as our Church service music was accompanied on a piano it was felt we needed a modern electronic organ. Thus as the Kitchen refurbishment and the modernisation of the heating and electrics had been completed, fundraising for the Chair Fund and the Organ Fund commenced. Various activities were organised to raise money and yet gave pleasure to all ages within the church. The older members organised plant and cake sales, sale of Christmas Cards through Webb Ivory and Coffee Mornings which in 1980 became known as 'Rest and Chat'. The young people had a car wash, a sponsored hike along the Ridgeway, a table tennis marathon and were active participants in Concerts. Through these years we had a Social Committee which organised barbecues, Beetle Drives, Old Time Musicals, Barn Dances, Garden Parties, Fancy Dress Parties, Valentine's Day Social, 'It's a Knockout' Competition and Harvest Suppers followed by concerts involving all ages. Tony Clark (Social Committee Chairman) completed the London Marathon on three occasions and part of his 'charity' money was donated to our Chair Fund. Concerts given by the Witney Senior Citizens Orchestra and the Wenrisc Singers helped our fundraising.

In February 1980 Paul Turner (son of Philip Turner) became a Deacon and Bob Richardson who served the Church as Deacon and Church Secretary was made a Life Deacon. Starting in July 1980 the Rev. Bob Henry with Mr Graham Lee organised an annual YPF camp at a site in Wales near Llandovery. Up to 19 young people used to look forward to this 'fun' week which included Christian teaching led by Bob. Christmas 1980 saw the 'birth' of a small choir organised by Mr P. Cartwright. The Women's Guild continued to meet on a Monday led by Mrs Auty, Mrs K. Collis and

in 1982 Miss Witt organised the monthly Ladies Tuesday Fellowship. A much valued Midweek Bible Study was led by the Rev. Henry and Mr Norman Chapman.

In July 1982 Mr George Howell resigned as Treasurer and Mr Tony Clark was elected as a replacement. Two months later Mr David Pearson resigned from the Diaconate. He had been a loyal servant of the Church not only as a Deacon but also as Church Treasurer.

Since the 'Henry's' arrival in Witney they lived in the Manse cottage next to the Church on 33A High Street. It was a lovely listed building but suffered from damp and not easily managed. It transpired that the Henry children's bronchial problems were probably as a result of this dampness and something had to be done.

A new Manse was found in Ducklington Lane, close to the Witney Bypass and the Henry's moved in, in August 1983. It was a bungalow with decent sized garden. To offset further loans the 33A High Street property was converted into commercial accommodation. The first floor suite of offices was let to Memotech, a company which manufactured Home Computers in the Station Lane Industrial Estate and the ground floor suite was rented by the Council to house the Citizens Advice Bureau. This was duly opened by our MP the Rt Hon. Douglas Hurd.

The highlight of the summer was the Church Family Outing to the Severn Valley which included a 25 mile steam train journey from Bewdley to Bridgenorth and a visit to the Iron Gorge Museum.

During November 1983 a Mother and Toddlers Group was formed led by Mrs Ann Henry and Mrs Rosemary Clark. I believe this was the precursor of our Noah's Ark.

The Diaconate in 1984 consisted of Mr Philip Turner (Church Secretary), Mr Tony Clark (Church Treasurer), Mrs Beryl

Cartwright, Mr George Howell, Mr Graham Lee, Mr 'Cliff' Puleston, Mr Peter Sellman, Mr Paul Turner and Miss Mary Witt. In February 1984 Mrs Daphne Turner resigned from being a Junior Church Teacher. The Church extended their sincere gratitude and thanks for her commitment and service to so many of our young people.

During three days of April the Church organised a holiday club entitled Easter Extra for 4-12 year olds. Under the leadership of Mrs Beryl Cartwright and Mrs Ann Henry and an army of church helpers (14) it was an overwhelming success. Easter Extra catered for 94 excited children. Each morning started with a communal 'assembly' introducing the biblical theme with songs and a film followed by games in the garden. Then the children split up to be involved in the activity groups of music, drama, cooking and art. Each session concluded with a sharing time in the church.

The 1984 July Church Outing ventured to Windsor, to witness the Changing of the Guard followed by a boat trip down the Thames and a picnic by the river. In the afternoon we visited the Saville Gardens and some decided to watch a Polo match in the Windsor Great Park. It was a happy day and we enjoyed the warm sunny weather together.

The YPF went off with Rev. Bob Henry and Mr Graham Lee to their August camp in Wales. For a few it was their last year as five of the youngsters succeeded in their 'A' levels and went off to College or University in September.

The year ended with concern for our new 'manse' in Ducklington Lane. Structural problems, especially decay of the woodwork of the windows, led the Deacons to consider expensive repairs or the possibility of looking for another more 'modern' Manse.



The following article is a mix of Bible readings and comments by Tony Horsfall, a former OMF missionary to the Far East, and has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

## Reflections on the Christmas Story

### **Matthew 1:18 - Joseph's dilemma**

*This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit...."*

It is not clear at what point Mary told Joseph the news of her pregnancy, but when she did it came as a bombshell. What should he do, knowing the child was not his? Could her story be true? He was however a righteous man, and he sought God for direction rather than acting impulsively. God spoke to him through a dream, confirming that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and this gave him the courage to stand by her, and take her as his wife. It was a brave decision, but he now knew that the child would be the One to save people from their sins.

It is easy when we have difficult decisions to make to be impetuous or hasty, but the best decisions are made slowly and with prayer. When you are making important choices ask God to guide you clearly, and to give you the courage to do what is right.

### **Matthew 1:22 - Long-awaited Immanuel**

*All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us')... And Joseph gave Him the name Jesus.*

The plan of salvation is intimately connected to the Old Testament, and was the fulfilment of prophecies made long

ago. God was sending His Son into the world that we might be saved. God is with us – this astonishing, mind-blowing truth underpinned Joseph's straight-forward trust in Him. Today as you get on with your life, pray that the wonder of knowing that God is with you will never be far from your awareness.

### **Luke 2:1-7 - Bethlehem**

*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world... so Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

This is perhaps the most familiar picture we have of the Christmas event—but remember what was happening. This was no ordinary child. In Jesus God became a human being and dwelt among us, perhaps the greatest miracle (and mystery) of all. As you visualise the scene again, let worship arise in your heart: *'From heaven you came, helpless Babe, entered our world your glory veiled.'* Emmanuel, God with us! The Servant King, worthy of all our adoration and love.

LORD God, in this season please help me to live in the wonder of your upside-down Kingdom where your love for us compels you to become helpless, vulnerable and dependent. May your Kingdom come in and through my life today.

### **Luke 2:8-12 - The Shepherds arrive**

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "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.*

The first visitors are not VIPs but humble shepherds who have been summoned by an angelic visitor. For those who have eyes to see, there hidden in the manger beneath the blankets is the Son of God, the one sent by the Father to be the Saviour of the world. Very few of those crowded into Bethlehem that night were aware of what was happening. Only those with faith could recognise the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. It is the same today.

Lord, I pray for eyes to see where the glory of Heaven touches earth. May I be alive today with the truth that the Saviour, rescuer, King Jesus has been born 'to us' and that there is joy in this for all people. May my life reflect that glory even in a small way in my interactions with people, so that in this Christmas season the good news of great joy will be known.

### **Luke 2:13-15 - Angel hosts**

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'*

The darkness of the Judean hillside was lit up by the appearance of a great angelic choir, messengers sent to herald the birth of the Saviour. Their song breaks the stillness of the night, first in praise of God for his act of mercy in sending the Son,

and then in proclamation of the peace the child will bring to earth. The shepherds now decide to do the unthinkable -leave their flocks, and head off into town to see the new born King. Such is the drawing power of the Saviour.

Sometimes there are things we too must leave behind if we are to follow his call, but whatever sacrifice is needed, it will be worth it just to find him for ourselves.

### **Luke 2:16-20 - Mary ponders**

*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ... Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen...*

The shepherds became the first evangelists, proclaiming the good news... That was their response, and it should be ours too.

But for Mary there followed a time of reflection. Exuberant witness and quiet contemplation are not opposites. They are in fact good companions in the spiritual life.

Thank you, LORD Jesus, that you are still found when we search for you. May I be willing to share the discovery I've made with others at this time. But I also want to know you better in my inner life, too. Please give me that balance of active following and heart-pondering reflection, especially in this Christmas season.



The following articles, have been extracted from Parish Pump:

## Mary's Christmas

As Jesus' mother, Mary plays a crucial part in the Christmas story. It begins with Gabriel's visit to her: *'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.'* (Luke 1:30,31). This conversation takes us straight to the heart of what Christmas is all about. God was doing something unique, that had never happened before! *'God was beginning, at this divine and human point, the New Creation of all things. The whole soiled and weary universe quivered at this direct injection of essential life.'* (CS Lewis).

This child unites heaven and earth: the eternal God entered time and space and became a baby, both a real human being and fully divine. It reminds me of the sci-fi film *Fantastic Voyage* (1966) in which a team of surgeons are shrunk to the size of blood cells and injected into the veins of a patient to perform lifesaving surgery. The Christmas message affirms that God has entered the bloodstream of humanity to put things right with Him on the inside. We can know Him personally and make sense of His world.

God chose an unknown, frightened teenage girl to bring about this new beginning for the world. Her response is the pattern for us, as we welcome God's special gift into our lives this Christmas: *"I am the Lord's servant"* Mary answered. *"May your word to me be fulfilled."* (Luke 1:38).

Mary gave an unqualified Yes to all that God wanted to do in her life. It was a costly decision, which risked both shame and scandal. Yet she was ready to obey God and trust His plans for her life, despite her many questions. Is the same true for us this Christmas?

## 160 years of healing in Nazareth

Jesus brought healing to Galilee, and nowadays the Nazareth Trust carries on this work through running one of the oldest hospitals in the Middle East.

The Nazareth Trust traces its roots back to 1861 and is now one of the largest Christian organisations in Israel. Located in Nazareth, the Trust engages with around 400,000 people a year, including patients and their families, nursing students, international volunteers, pilgrims, and tourists, as well as their staff.

In fact, the Nazareth Hospital is one of the oldest hospitals in the Middle East, and the largest in Nazareth. The hospital is run by the Nazareth Trust and began in 1861, when a young Christian doctor, Dr Kaloost Vartan, made the journey from Edinburgh to Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus, to establish a small four-bed clinic.

At the time, it was the only medical facility in the town, and as far as Damascus and Beirut in the north, and Jerusalem in the south. Dr Vartan carried out pioneering medical work, reaching out to a population with a very low life expectancy.

Today the Nazareth Hospital is a general hospital with Nazareth's main Emergency Room that works 24/7, ICU, a recently refurbished Path Lab, Orthopaedic Surgical department, General Surgical department, a Paediatric surgical unit, Urology Unit and Esthetic Clinic. There is also an extensive Medical department and Psychiatry department.

The Nazareth Hospital is one of the area's biggest employers. It is affiliated with Bar-Ilan University and is committed to developing medical education and research. Each year it welcomes many students of medicine, nursing and other medical fields from universities and colleges around the world. The Trust would welcome your support. Please visit:

<https://nazarethtrust.org>

## Christmas Quiz 2022 answers

- Novak Djokovic was due to play at the Australian Open but prevented because he had declined a Covid vaccination
- They choose to the Morse stories
- Meatloaf
- It snowed at the Winter Olympics
- Actor and singer Michael Flanders
- He was a comedian
- King Richard
- Partygate was the furore about parties held in Downing Street
- Tractorgate was the alleged incident when an MP looked at inappropriate material online during a session of the House of Commons
- Beergate was a political controversy concerning allegations that an event in Durham in April 2021 could have been in breach of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions
- Diego Maradona
- Ramsey on the Isle of Man and Stanley in the Falklands
- Carry on Cleo
- Paddington was played by Ukrainian President in the Ukrainian language version of the film
- He was Frank Williams in the BBC television sitcom Dad's Army
- Its title was Bernard Who? 75 Years of Doing Absolutely Everything
- Nichelle Nichols who played Uhura in the Star Trek franchise
- Durham

## October Cub Camp

In a brave initiative Witney Buttercross Cubs camped in the church garden in mid-October. Twelve cubs (boys and girls) with six leaders spend an interesting time braving the elements and camping overnight. It proved to be one of the wettest nights of the year but that didn't stop them all enjoying themselves tremendously.

Several parents, while bringing their children into the garden – through the main entrance of the church – commented on what a lovely facility it was and ***they didn't even know it was here.***

The group pitched seven tents in total and that still left space for some activities.





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

## 90 years of broadcasting the Royal Christmas Messages

This year we shall have our first Royal Christmas Message from King Charles III. He follows in a tradition that spans three generations.

It was 90 years ago, on 25th December 1932, that the first Royal Christmas Message was broadcast on radio. King George V addressed the nation live from Sandringham. A quarter of a century later, on 25th December 1957, the Christmas message by Queen Elizabeth II was televised for the first time.

King George V had been asked to broadcast a Christmas message in 1922, but at the time he felt that radio was for entertainment, and therefore not suitable. Ten years later, after a visit to the BBC, he was persuaded otherwise, and agreed to do it as part of the inauguration of the new Empire Service (now the World Service).

The time chosen was 3pm because it was the best time for reaching most countries in the Empire. In fact, the first message started five minutes late and lasted only two and a half minutes, but it made a massive impact and established itself as a regular Christmas Day event.

Edward VIII never delivered a Christmas broadcast, but King George VI continued the tradition, using it to encourage people during the second world war. Queen Elizabeth II broadcast her first Christmas message in 1952, again from a room at Sandringham, and five years later agreed that her Christmas message could be televised – live. She proved to be a natural broadcaster.

But times changed, and in 1960 the message was pre-recorded from Buckingham Palace, which meant that it could be sent to Commonwealth countries for broadcast at a convenient time. However, the 3pm UK broadcast continued every year – except 1969, when the Queen wrote a message instead, believing that the Royal Family had received enough exposure with the TV documentary *Royal Family*, which had aired in the summer.

But the tradition was resumed the following year. The Christmas message is now also available each year as a podcast and can be seen through Facebook and YouTube. King Charles III is expected to give his first Christmas message this year.



## 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.*

#### 25. Mark 9:30-50.

"They went on from there and passed through Galilee." With these words Mark once again introduces a feeling of purposeful movement. The time away from Jesus's main arena of work is finished. His disciples now know who he is and have been given an insight into his destiny. That insight they seem unable to grasp, to accept - yet accept it they must if they are indeed to become what Jesus had named them to be - apostles (3:14). Jesus moves into Galilee, into the quiet places away from people. Says Mark, "He did not want anyone to know it, for he was teaching his disciples." It is a time to concentrate on preparing these men for that which lay ahead. The first step in this period of teaching is a re-iteration of the words concerning his betrayal, death and resurrection. There is however a certain poignant difference from the words Mark has recorded in 8:31. Whereas on that occasion Jesus spoke of suffering and of rejection by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, now the words Mark records are

"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands." The word used for "betrayed" means "handed over, put into the charge or care of", while the term "human hands" could equally well be rendered "the hands of men". So we could render the words: "The Son of Man is put into the care of the hands of Men". He who came to be the full embodiment of what Man should be is placed in the charge of what Men actually are! It is not just the elders, the chief priests, the scribes - or even just the Jews - but Men, human beings such as each one of us is, who, when entrusted with the care of the Son of Man, will kill him.

Once again the disciples are bewildered; they are unable to understand what Jesus is telling them. How can it be possible that he whom they now believe is the Messiah, the One who is expected to restore God's chosen people to a place of greatness among the nations, will not be accepted and thus go on to achieve his destiny in triumph? How can it be possible that he is to be killed? Although Jesus goes on to speak of rising again three days after he is killed, these words seem to have had little impact upon the disciples at the time. The disciples just cannot understand what it all means and, Mark records, "were afraid to ask him". We may wonder why they were afraid to ask - could it be because they were beginning to get some inkling or understanding of what following Jesus all the way might mean for them? Could it be that they were afraid of facing up to thoughts which they were trying to suppress because they were still holding on to personal ambitions, desiring their own glorification?

Mark indicates that such may have been the situation as he tells of Jesus and his disciples moving back from the quiet places to their base in Capernaum where Jesus confronts the disciples with the question, "What were you arguing about on the way?" They give him no answer, for to do so would have

meant admitting to personal ambition, to the desire to be not just great but "the Greatest". By now it had got through to them that such was not the way of Jesus, nor an attitude which he would desire in his followers. However on the journey the subject had been discussed among them and it would seem that voices had become raised so that Jesus had heard some of their thoughts. Receiving no reply to his question, Jesus continues to teach them about what it means to be his disciples. Says Mark, "He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."" We can picture the scene, the disciples seated around Jesus, each thinking his own thoughts, wondering whether he really wanted to be the greatest or just to be rather important, looked up to by other people - and now Jesus says these words about being last of all, servant of all. What can they say, where can they look as Jesus turns his eyes upon each one of them in turn?

Maybe the disciples were saved from having to respond by a little child, a little child creeping into the room to see what all these strange men are doing in his home? Perhaps it was so. And Jesus, seeing the young one, beckons to the child and holds out his arms in welcome. In a moment the child is sitting on Jesus's lap and the tension in the room is relieved. Such may have been the way of it, Mark gives us no clue but simply paints the picture of Jesus setting a child in the midst of his disciples and speaking of receiving such a child, of welcoming a child such as this one "in my name". To do so is to welcome him and to welcome the one who sent him. It is as though Jesus is saying that a child is his envoy, his representative, his ambassador - a child, the being at the bottom of the importance table in contemporary thought. What another turning of the world upside down - to be first is to be the servant of all, and the ambassador of God is to be found in

a child!

The disciples are finding this all heavy going and Mark depicts John as trying to change the subject. Somewhere in their travelling, while away from Jesus, the disciples have come across an exorcist casting out demons in name of Jesus. Such action was not unusual in those times; many exorcists would use the name of another person or teacher who seemed to have power over demons in their own exorcisms without feeling any obligation to become a close follower of the person named. However, the disciples took exception to the man's actions in appropriating the name of Jesus for his own purposes. Perhaps they were anxious to protect Jesus's reputation or possibly their own particular relationship with him. After all, they had themselves performed exorcisms in the name of Jesus (6:13). Meeting this apparently successful exorcist, who wasn't one who followed with them, the disciples had tried to stop him. It is not clear whether they had tried to stop him exorcising demons or merely stop him doing so in the name of Jesus. Jesus seems unconcerned; his response to John's information suggests that he does not want to encourage any sense among his followers of being an exclusive group; "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me." Good is being done - and it is being done in the name of Jesus. This in itself is a form of acknowledgement that Jesus is good, that that which he teaches is indeed of God.

Mark now pictures Jesus as quoting what is believed to be a proverb of the day. "Whoever is not against us is for us." And then, perchance to further illustrate how this proverb is to be applied in action for good, there follows a saying about giving a cup of cold water to those who bear the name of Christ. Such people will not go unrewarded. Whether these events did happen at this

particular time and place can be questioned. The phrase used here is unusual since the word "Christ" appears without the definite article "the", the only place in Mark's Gospel (or indeed in the other Gospels) where this usage occurs. Many scholars conclude that Mark has here introduced a formula common in the Early Church which, while being typical of what Jesus had to teach, does not record his actual words. Also the introductory words "truly I tell you" are words which Mark has used previously (3:28; 8:12; 9:1) as a way of introducing into his narrative a detached saying of Jesus of which he is aware but the original context of which he does not know. Nevertheless, there is here a parallel between serving in the simplest of actions one who bears the name of Christ and of welcoming a little child in his name. The way of "greatness" in the Kingdom is shown by both.

Further such "detached sayings" of Jesus, indicating the true sense of value and the self-sacrifice which following him involves, are now included by Mark. First comes a saying about causing "little ones who believe in me" to stumble. We may think that such "little ones" refer to the little child whom Jesus set in the midst. Such is not an unreasonable interpretation, but it seems more likely that Jesus is referring to those who are young in the faith, who are still finding their way in following after him. Rather than cause such to stumble "it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea". The picture is extreme. The word translated "great" is literally "of a donkey"; the millstone is not from a hand mill which a woman would use but rather the stone from a mill that would be turned by a donkey: one might possibly escape from a hand millstone around the neck, but not from a donkey stone!

Following this startling saying, come still more extreme sayings - each one designed to

emphasise the seriousness of actions which harm or destroy the faith, not just of other people but of oneself. If any part of your being causes you to stumble, to be led into sin, then you are better off without that particular part of your being. Three forms of self-mutilation are advocated as being better than suffering the results of being caused to offend by the particular bodily organ in question. Failure to be the person God would have you to be causes one to end up in hell, the place where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. Just what does this mean? The word rendered "hell" is "Gehenna". Gehenna was a valley to the west of Jerusalem where in olden days children were sacrificed to the god Moloch (II Kings 23:10; Jer.7:31 etc.). During the great reformation under King Josiah the shrines holy to Moloch were destroyed and the valley of Hinnom (or Gehenna) was converted to become the refuse dump for Jerusalem, a place of rotting vegetation and flesh infested with maggots, and of fires which burnt up rubbish day and night. No one went to Gehenna if they could possibly avoid going there! Perhaps we might describe the place as being "hell on earth". So we can see these sayings of Jesus as pictorial warnings to those who would be his followers to do all that they can to avoid finding themselves in such a place of torment. These sayings do not seem to justify attributing to Jesus a fully developed doctrine of eternal punishment particular when we remember that if human beings ceased adding rubbish to the fires of Gehenna they would eventually go out, and that without further supplies of discarded organic matter, the maggots would eventually turn all into healthy compost. These sayings are a reminder to the disciples, to us, of need for self-sacrifice in order to follow the way of Jesus, as well as being a reminder that it is our rubbish which creates the need for such a place as Gehenna



Finally, in this section concerning Jesus teaching his disciples about what it really means to follow him, Mark includes three further short sayings of Jesus. Lacking the original context in which these words were spoken together with the fact that different Greek manuscripts diverge considerably one from another, it is not easy to know what may have been the full purpose of Jesus when he spoke these words. All three sayings concern salt. Salt was used to season, to purify and to preserve. These three uses underlie these sayings. First, "For everyone will be salted with fire." Fire burns, consumes, destroys, but fire also purifies. Fire is used to purify in the refining of metals; fire is also used to burn off old dead, useless growth so that new growth may spring forth. Salting with fire can be seen as the opening up of new opportunities, as the refining for greater use that can come to the followers of Jesus through the fire of persecution. Second, "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?" Here is a reminder that salt does not exist for itself, its purpose is to season, to bring out the real flavour in life. But if the salt, the disciples lose the saltiness, lose the essence of what being a follower of Jesus is about, lose the ability or the willingness to be the servant, then what can be done? Maybe this is where the renewal by fire comes in! Third, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Keep within yourselves the qualities of salt to purify, preserve and add flavour to life - yet also remember that "spicing up" of life is not about conflict, for the follower of Jesus it is about being at peace with one another.

So Mark concludes this short section of his Gospel devoted to Jesus spending time specifically in teaching his disciples the way and the cost of following him. There is much more such teaching yet to come but from now on it will come amidst the accelerating

pressure of events as Mark continues to present his two questions; "Who is this Jesus?" and "Will you follow in his Way?"



## KEY STATISTICS ON RELIGION, ETHNICITY AND LANGUAGE

### RELIGION

- Some 27.5 million people in England and Wales described themselves as Christian, or 46.2 per cent. The first time the proportion has dropped below a half.
- The percentage of people saying they had no religion jumped from around a quarter in 2011 (14.1 million) to over a third in 2021 (22.2 million).
- The proportion of people describing themselves as Muslim rose from 4.9 per cent (2.7 million) to 6.5 per cent (3.9 million), Hindu from 1.5 per cent (818,000 people) to 1.7 (1 million) and Sikh from 0.8 per cent (423,000) to 0.9 (524,000), while Jewish remained broadly unchanged at 0.5 per cent (271,000).
- Under "any other religion", the largest group identified as Pagan, with a tenfold rise from 2011 in those identifying themselves as Shaman.
- The local authority in England with the highest percentage of people reporting as Christian in 2021 was Knowsley (66.6 per cent). In Wales, it was Anglesey and Flintshire (both 51.5).

### ETHNICITY

- Some 81.7 per cent (48.7 million) of the population of England and Wales identified as white in the 2021 census, down from 86 per cent in 2011.
- Within the group identifying as white, 74.4 per cent said they were "English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British", down from 80.5 per cent in 2011 and 87.5 per cent in 2001.
- The proportion of people identifying as Asian rose from

- 7.5 per cent (4.2 million) in 2011 to 9.3 (5.5 million) in 2021; people identifying as black rose from 3.3 per cent (1.9 million) to 4.0 (2.4 million); mixed or multiple ethnic groups rose from 2.2 per cent (1.2 million) to 2.9 (1.7 million); and other groups rose from 1 per cent (564,000) to 2.1 per cent (1.3 million).
- London remains England's most ethnically diverse region, with 36.8 per cent identifying as "white English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British", down from 44.9 per cent.

### LANGUAGE

- A total of 91.1 per cent of residents had English as a main language (including English or Welsh in Wales), down slightly from 92.3 a decade earlier.
- A further 7.1 per cent of people were proficient in English, speaking it "well" or "very well", but did not speak it as their main language.
- The most common main languages other than English were Polish (1.1 per cent of the population), Romanian (0.8 per cent), Punjabi (0.5 per cent) and Urdu (0.5 per cent).
- The East Midlands was the region with the highest percentage of people who had Polish as a main language (1.5 per cent, or 71,000), rising to 5.7 per cent in the local authority of Boston in Lincolnshire.
- Wolverhampton was the local authority with the largest percentage of people with Punjabi as a main language (6.5 per cent, or 17,000), while Slough had the largest proportion of people with Urdu as a main language (4.3 per cent, or 7,000).

The following articles have been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

## **6<sup>th</sup> January:**

### **Epiphany**

On 6<sup>th</sup> January we celebrate Epiphany - the visit of the Wise Men to the baby Jesus. But who were these Wise Men? No one knows for sure. Matthew calls them 'Magi', and that was the name of an ancient caste of a priestly kind from Persia. It wasn't until the third century that they were called kings - by a church father, Tertullian.

Another church father, Origin, assumed there were three - to correspond with the gifts given. Later Christian interpretation came to understand gold as a symbol of wisdom and wealth, incense as a symbol of worship and sacrifice, and myrrh as a symbol of healing - and even embalming. Certainly Jesus challenged and set aright the way in which the world handled all three of these things. Since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Magi have had the names Balthasar, Caspar and Melchior.

### **Gold, frankincense and myrrh for the infant Jesus**

Epiphany is also known as 'Twelfth Night', or the last night of the Christmas festival. According to the song, it is also the day when that over-enthusiastic 'true love' of yours dumps no less than 78 presents on your doorstep, among them a dozen leaping lords of the realm and a final partridge - to go with the 11 you have already been given.

In many parts of the world, 6<sup>th</sup> January is celebrated as Christmas Day. As we Western Christians are packing away our tree, the Greek Orthodox world and Catholic Spain are giving presents and celebrating the wise men, or magi. For what better time to give presents to each other, than on the day the wise men

presented gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus?

What do we make of these presents? Gold is for kingship, proclaiming a royal child. Frankincense carries a feeling of worship about it: it was used in the temple worship and indicated access to the presence of God. Frankincense is thus for worship and incarnation.

The third gift, myrrh, finds its place at Calvary. After the crucifixion, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea prepared Jesus' body for burial, using myrrh as an embalming fluid. Thus, when the wise men visit the baby Jesus, the shadow of the cross already falls across the crib. But myrrh is also symbolic of love, so you could say that the third gift is about adoration as well as death. And Christ's death on the cross is for love of the Church, His bride.

As for the magi, they were not Jewish grandees, but foreign Gentiles. And so it was clear, from as early as the manger in Bethlehem, that Jesus was not just the Messiah for the Jews, but the Saviour of the whole world.

### **Where did the Wise Men come from?**

Magi from the East - it isn't a lot to go on. The Magi had originally been a religious caste among the Persians. Their devotion to astrology, divination and the interpretation of dreams led to an extension in the meaning of the word, and by the first century the Magi in Matthew's gospel could have been astrologers from outside of Persia. Some scholars believe they might have come from what was then Arabia Felix, or as we would say today, southern Arabia.

It is true that in the first century astrology was practised there, and it was the region where the Queen of Sheba had lived. She of course had visited Solomon and would

have heard the prophecies about how one day a Messiah would be born to the Israelites and become their king.

Matthew's gospel (chapter 2) is clear that the Magi asked Herod: 'Where is the One who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.' So it is possible that in southern Arabia the Queen of Sheba's story of how a Messiah would one day be sent to the Israelites had survived. Certainly, there are a number of other early legends that connect southern Arabia with Solomon's Israel.

To many people this makes sense: that the ancient stories of a Messiah, linked to later astrological study, prompted these alert and god-fearing men to the realisation that something very stupendous was happening in Israel. They realised that after all these centuries, the King of the Jews, the Messiah, was about to be born.

One more interesting thing that gives weight to the theory that the Magi came from southern Arabia is this: if you study any map of Palestine as it was during biblical times, you will find that the old Arabian caravan routes all entered Palestine 'from the East'.

### **Wise Men Seek Him** (Canon Paul Hardingham)

*'A cold coming we had of it. Just the worst time of the year. For a journey and such a long journey.'* (Journey of the Magi, T.S. Eliot).

In this poem, T.S. Eliot imagines the journey of the Magi to worship Jesus, as told in Matthew 2. This story is at the heart of our celebration of Epiphany, as we remember the astrologers from the East following a star to find the baby: *'Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the One who has*

*been born king of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.'* (Matthew 2:1,2).

The Magi provide a powerful picture of the journey we make in searching for God in our lives. Like them, it requires time and effort (they travelled for months) and will not always be easy! As they followed the star, so we are called to pursue God's light in our lives.

What does this say to us at the beginning of a New Year? Are we ready to go deeper in our relationship with God? Are we looking for new ways to use our time, treasure and talents for Him? It is a great time to offer these things to Him, and like the Magi, commit ourselves to pursuing Him. His light, through prayer, worship and His Word, will be our guide on the way.

T.S. Eliot used the imagined journey of the Magi to reflect on his own spiritual journey. It reveals the pain and doubts he experienced on his long and troubled journey to find the light of Christ. He describes finding Christ as a *'hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death'*. Are we prepared to make this journey for ourselves?



The following two articles about Christians & Christianity, have been extracted from Parish Pump

## Ukrainian Christians standing defiant

Church leaders in Ukraine have expressed their doubts about any meaningful peace talks with Russia, after a fresh wave of missile strikes in recent weeks.

The primate of Ukraine's independent Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Epiphany (Dumenko) said: "Our continuing struggle will certainly be crowned with success with God's help – we are fighting for our homeland's liberation, our own existence, and our children's futures. It should also be clearly understood that this struggle isn't just physical, but also spiritual. It cannot be that the body of our state is Ukrainian, while its spirit is Russian.

The Franciscan RC bishop of Odesa, the Rt Revd Stanislav Shyrokoradiuk, said that "although pressure is being exerted on us to negotiate and cede territory, our government and armed services will not agree to this; we've already suffered too much, while everyone knows any concessions will merely fuel further demands."

Churches in Ukraine recently staged a Day of Prayer for Orphans, as aid agencies warn that the destruction of power and water supplies could drive a whole new flood of refugees westwards.

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## Stamping out Christianity in the Middle East

Christianity is facing an 'existential threat' in parts of the Middle East, as many communities have dwindled to mere shadows of their former selves. A recent study of Christian persecution by the RC

charity Aid to the Church In Need has found that nearly 75 years on from the creation of the state of Israel, Christians in the West Bank have declined from 18 per cent to less than one per cent. In Syria, the numbers of Christians have sunk from ten per cent in 2011 – before the war began – to less than two per cent now.

The report, *Persecuted and Forgotten*, warns that even after the defeat of Daesh more than five years ago, "the threat of a full-scale resurgence has by no means disappeared.

"A revival of jihadism has the potential to deliver a knock-out blow for Christianity in its ancient heartland. This is not only because the numbers of Christians are now so low, but also because their confidence is so fragile; they have made it through times of genocide, but in the absence of security, the draw of migration is – for many of them – all but irresistible. Treated as second-class citizens, discriminated against at school and in the workplace, poor pay or joblessness trigger many to seek a life outside the country."

The study looked at 24 countries where violence against Christians is high. It found evidence to suggest a deepening of persecution in the past two years. In just one example, Nigeria, the Archbishop of Ondo speaks of a genocide taking place in his country. In just 18 months, more than 7,600 Christians have been killed.



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

## **The story behind the hymn: Good King Wenceslas**

Each year at Christmas we sing about good King Wenceslas looking on the Feast of Stephen... ever wonder who on earth he was? Here are three of the five verses...

*Good King Wenceslas looked out on the  
Feast of Stephen  
When the snow lay round about, deep and  
crisp and even.  
Brightly shone the moon that night, tho'  
the frost was cruel  
When the poor man came in sight,  
gathering winter fuel...*

*Bring me flesh and bring me wine; bring  
me pine logs hither;  
Thou and I will see him dine when we bear  
them thither.  
Page and monarch forth they went, forth  
they went together,  
Through the rude winds' wild lament, and  
the bitter weather...*

*In his master's steps he trod where the  
snow lay dinted;  
Heat was in the very sod which the saint  
had printed.  
Therefore Christian men, be sure wealth or  
rank possessing,  
Ye who now will bless the poor, shall  
yourself find blessing.*

This carol was 900 years in the making... and started with a brutal murder in Bohemia.

For Wenceslas was a real person, the Duke of Bohemia, who lived in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century. He seems to have been a rare ruler, in that he was just and had compassion for the poor. His goodness made him enemies, and when he was only 22, he was assassinated on the steps of a church in Prague in 935.

But that was not the end of Wenceslas. Deeply mourned by the common people, he was soon considered a martyr and a saint. A cult of Wenceslas grew up in Bohemia, influencing the High Middle Ages idea of the *rex Justus* – or 'righteous king' - that is, a monarch whose power stems mainly from his great piety.

The story of Wenceslas came to England sometime before 1853, when Queen Victoria's envoy to Stockholm sent some rare books to a friend, John Mason Neale, Warden of Sackville College, East Grinstead. Here Neale found the story of Wenceslas in an ancient poem by Czech poet Václav Alois Svoboda. Neale published his translation as a carol in 1853. He made the 'Duke' into a 'King', as a later Pope had conferred the regal title on Wenceslas.

The carol tells the poignant story of a young king and his page braving harsh winter weather in order to bring food, wine and fuel to a poor peasant on the Feast of St Stephen (26 December). The journey is terrible, and the page only gets through by following in the king's footprints, step by step, through deep snow. There are themes here of following Christ, through suffering, to do good to the poor.

If the story is ancient, so is the melody that Neale chose for his carol - it goes back to Finland in 1582.

Good King Wenceslas... today, a millennium after his brutal murder, he is still remembered in Prague, where a statue of him stands tall in the middle of Wenceslas Square. His goodness is not forgotten.





Luke 2:14