

# CORNERSTONE

The Magazine of  
**WITNEY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

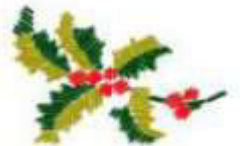


Christ Jesus is the chief cornerstone.

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



**December 2023 & January 2024**



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; with world events going from bad to worse. As well as the war in Ukraine, we have had unprecedented wild fires, storms and floods across the world, and now we have the war in Israel and Gaza. Meanwhile, the cost-of-living crisis continues, and food banks in the UK look set to be overwhelmed. 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.



I now turn to some of this month's contents: along with the standard contributions; there is the last issue of Ken Lee's Bible Study; Pip Cartwright gives us the history of WCC; Lesley Barter writes about Light in the darkness, and, along with the standard contents, 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 2024 is due on **Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> February** and wishing you a Merry



Your Editor

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# December 2023 & January 2024 Diary

## December

3 <sup>rd</sup>	am	Rev Elaine Kinchin	Advent 1
	pm	Rev Elaine & David Kinchin	Communion
10	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	Advent 2
17 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Judi Holloway	Advent 3 Carol Service with Communion
24 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	Advent 4
	11.15pm	Rev Bryan Doyle	High St Methodist Church
25 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	Christmas Day All-Age
31 <sup>st</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	
	3.00pm	Rev Judi Holloway	Madley Park Residential Home

## January

6 <sup>th</sup>	11.00am	Saturday Praise	
7 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	
	pm	Nanna Blackman	Communion
14 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	
21 <sup>st</sup>	am	Rev Judi Holloway	Communion
28 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	

## February

3 <sup>rd</sup>	11.00am	Saturday Praise	
4 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	
	pm	Rev Elaine Kinchin	Communion
11 <sup>th</sup>	am	Rev Bryan Doyle	

The following events are given for your particular attention:

## December

5 <sup>th</sup>	Lite Bite piece of the Word	12.15pm
	Hi5's Games Taster Evening	6.00pm
7 <sup>th</sup>	Safe Place and repeated on 14 <sup>th</sup>	12.00 – 2.00pm
21 <sup>st</sup>	Carols with soup & mince pies	10.30am

## January

4 <sup>th</sup>	Safe Place and repeated on 11 <sup>th</sup> , 18 <sup>th</sup> & 25 <sup>th</sup>	12.00 – 2.00pm
5 <sup>th</sup>	Hi 5's Fish & Chips Supper	6.00pm
9 <sup>th</sup>	Lite Bite piece of the Word	12.15pm
27 <sup>th</sup>	Witney Book Circle	10.30am

## February

1 <sup>st</sup>	Safe Place and repeated on 8 <sup>th</sup> , 15 <sup>th</sup> , 22 <sup>nd</sup> & 29 <sup>th</sup>	12.00 – 2.00pm
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## Rotas

### WELCOMING TEAM

<b>December</b>	03	Pat Brent
	10	Lesley Barter
	17	Janet Hayes
	24	Jacqui Powlesland
	31	Pat Smith
<b>January</b>	07	Pat Brent
	14	Lesley Barter
	21	Janet Hayes
	28	Jacqui Powlesland
<b>February</b>	04	Pat Smith



## FLOWERS

<b>December</b>	03	Judi Holloway
	10	Christmas Tree
	17	Christmas Tree
	24	Christmas Tree
	31	Christmas Tree
<b>January</b>	07	Rita Hayes
	14	Pat Brent
	21	Janet Hayes
<b>February</b>	28	Jacqui Powlesland
	04	Judi Holloway
	11	Rita Hayes



## SUNDAY COFFEE

<b>December</b>	03	Elaine Kinchin
	10	Pat Smith & Pat Brent
	17	Jean Hodgson & Ann Clack
	24	Jacqui & Terry Powlesland
	31	Elaine Kinchin
<b>January</b>	07	Sue Birdseye & Claire Woodward
	14	Pat Smith & Pat Brent
	21	Jean Hodgson & Ann Clack
<b>February</b>	28	Jacqui & Terry Powlesland
	04	Elaine Kinchin
	11	Pat Smith & Pat Brent



## THURSDAY COFFEE (10 – 12)      Soup Lunch (12 – 2)

<b>December</b>	07	Pat Smith	See Rota in kitchen
	14	Ann Clack	
	21	The Team	
<b>January</b>	04	Jean Hodgson	
	11	Elaine Kinchin	
	18	Judi Holloway	
<b>February</b>	25	Pat Smith	
	01	David Kinchin	
	08	Ann Clack	



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

## SOUND SYSTEM

<b>December</b>	03	Terry Powlesland
	10	Tony Houghton
	17	Terry Powlesland
	24	Tony Houghton
	25	Terry Powlesland
<b>January</b>	07	Terry Powlesland
	14	Nanna Blackman
	21	Tony Houghton
<b>February</b>	28	Nanna Blackman
	04	Terry Powlesland
	11	Nanna Blackman



**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  
09 Joan White  
16 Layla Holloway  
25 Preston Holloway  
29 Cecily Lau



**Feb** 04 Elaine Beechey

**Jan** 02 Benjamin Esapa  
Joseph Esapa  
Margaret Esapa  
07 Storm Wallace-Heppell  
13 Anthony Beechey  
14 Elaine de Fraine  
15 Ruth Doyle  
23 Heather Houghton  
David Kinchin

## Nativity Quiz

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

*Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and a*



## MINISTER'S LETTER

The door to this year is closing swiftly: the year has passed so quickly. It's an appropriate time to reflect on all that's happened in the year 2023. Amid the hustle and bustle of daily life, with things to do, places to go and people to see, our ever-present God was with us every step of the way, moment by moment, each day. In those times of trouble, He was our Peace and in those times of sadness and grieving, He was our Comforter and our joy was made complete in Him.

Let's retrace our steps and remember those special moments that create lasting memories. With thankful hearts, let's count all our blessings, especially those times spent with friends and family, our loved ones.

As the year draws to a close and Advent and Christmas are upon us, it's also an appropriate time to reflect on God's goodness. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16). This giving of His only Son, this incredible gift of love, was manifest in human form, in Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us! Throughout our Advent journey, let's get caught up afresh in the wonder of God pouring out His love on us in the most beautiful of all gifts given to humankind, the babe in the manger, His Son, Jesus Christ! That ordinary night with an ordinary sky transformed by God breaking into our world with a dazzling display, which included the angels from the realms of glory announcing the birth of the Saviour of the world. Silent sheep became a bleating chorus of curiosity, and the sleeping shepherds were startled by the angel and his message, "Do not be afraid. I bring good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." That announcement was followed by a heavenly host singing God's praises.

How did the shepherds respond to this magnificent display? "So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." (Luke 2:16-18). Once they had seen Immanuel and experienced His presence, they returned to their field, glorifying and praising God!

I pray that this Advent and Christmas will be a wondrous time of experiencing afresh the mystery, glory and beauty of the Incarnation. Let us all draw near to God in human form, baby Jesus, and like the shepherds, gaze upon Him and invite Him to touch us with His powerful and transforming love and fill us with His love, joy and peace, so that we too may praise and glorify God and spread the good news of great joy for all people.

In closing, thank you so much to all who make up the Witney Congregational Church family, for your love, encouragement and support over this past year, for both Ruth and I – it has been a blessed privilege to join this family and serve all of you, my precious brothers and sisters in Christ.

As we look ahead to the new year, I pray that even in these challenging times, we will hold fast to our faith in Jesus Christ, keep our eyes fixed on Him and walk together confidently with Him, knowing that He has a good, pleasing and perfect plan for each of us and for our church.

Have a blessed Christmas,

Your brother in Christ,

Bryan



## PRAYER LETTER No 210

We have had two church meetings since the last prayer chain letter and there have been exciting developments!

We decided that WhatsApp would now become our medium of choice, although texting, email and phone calls are still used for those who need them. However, the most exciting change we made is that ALL members were invited to take part in the prayer chain! We acknowledge that, as church members, we are all in a relationship with God therefore we are all willing and able to respond as we see fit to prayer requests.

At our most recent church meeting, we discussed Prayer Chain Etiquette: in other words, we tweaked the way we want things to be done. You are more than welcome to contact me and I will post on WhatsApp (my mobile phone number is at the bottom of this letter). Secondly, we decided that, except in dire emergencies, posting would only take place between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. Lastly, we considered that a post on WhatsApp is like putting up a poster – there is no need to comment on the poster, just read it and act appropriately.

So, having got the new system of our Prayer Chain out of the way, let me tell you about a book I have been reading. It is called *A Private House of Prayer* and was written by Leslie D Weatherhead in 1958. Although he trained at a Methodist College, Weatherhead became minister at the City Temple – believe it or not - a Congregational Church in London.



On page 3 Weatherhead wrote: *every serious Christian recognises that prayer is essential*. Then he explores what Jesus said about prayer. Before issuing the words of the Lord's prayer, Jesus said: *But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door* (Matthew 6:6 NRSV). Remember the setting – everyone lived together, in a one-roomed house - there was nowhere to withdraw; Weatherhead decided that Jesus meant an imaginary room. He then expands this to seven rooms, each dedicated to a different aspect of prayer. As you wander through the rooms, sometimes you will spend more time in one than another, but God can be found in every space.

**Room 1** Affirm the presence of God e.g. with words from Psalm 139:7 *I can never be lost to your Spirit! I can never get away from my God!*

**Room 2** Praise, thank and adore God perhaps using words from a hymn.

**Room 3** Confession, forgiveness and unloading *"In this room we tell God everything that troubles us."*

**Room 4** Affirmation and reception Now we have cleansed ourselves before our God, we can pray about the peace of God or his everlasting arms.

**Room 5** Purified desire and sincere petition Having lingered in the other rooms, we may find that what we desired to ask God has now been modified as our wisdom increased when we spent time with God.

**Room 6** Intercession for others This is what many people think of when they say, “I’ve said my prayers”, but look what riches those people miss along the way...

**Room 7** Meditation on a passage of scripture, a poem, the lyrics of a hymn...

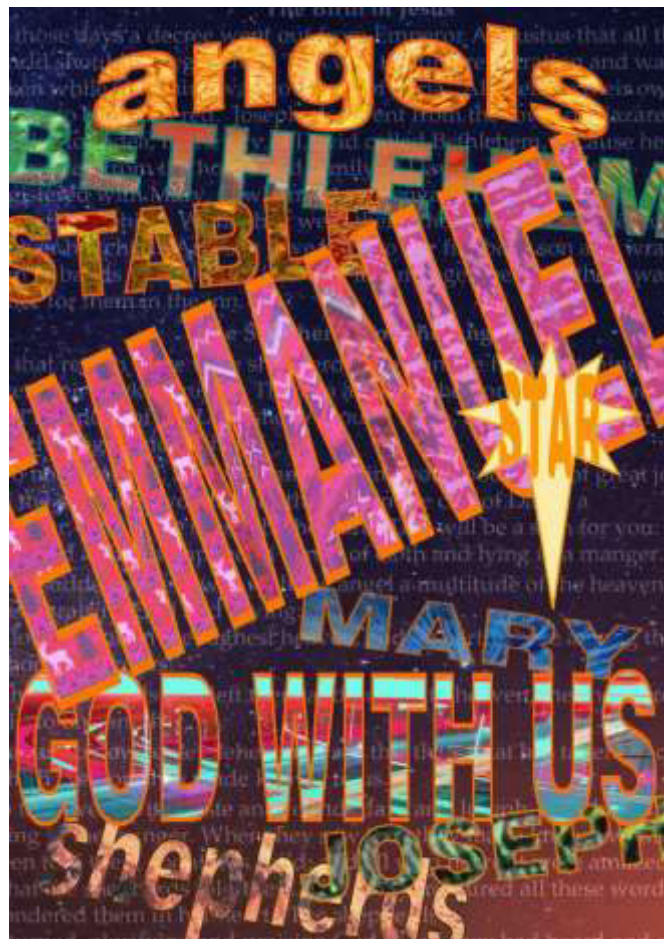
REMEMBER there is no right or wrong way to pray, but often we get stale in our side of the conversation with God and wonder why his answers are the equivalent of a wife talking to her husband, who is reading the paper. His answer to anything she says is: *Yes, dear*. Yet our God delights to say more than that to us, to quiet our hearts, pour his love into our lives and through us to speak to the world of the love of Jesus and the peace that passes understanding. It is our duty to find a way of praying that makes our communication with God vibrant and relevant.

Perhaps now is the time to commit to put God first, not to just shoehorn him into time that is left over from our other chores and duties. After all Martin Luther is credited with saying: “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer”!

Every Blessing, Elaine

07534 879449

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





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

## Light in the Darkness

This year more than most, on Remembrance Weekend you may, like me, have been struck by the futility of war. Probably because we see it every day now on our TV screens: The senseless waste of life and the destruction of what has been painfully constructed, often over centuries. Side by side with this was the mindless vandalism of the beautiful 'Sycamore Gap' tree. What has happened to the human race that we are set on a course of self-obliteration, taking everything that makes life worth living with us? Where is God in all this – has He just given up on us? We could hardly be surprised if He has.

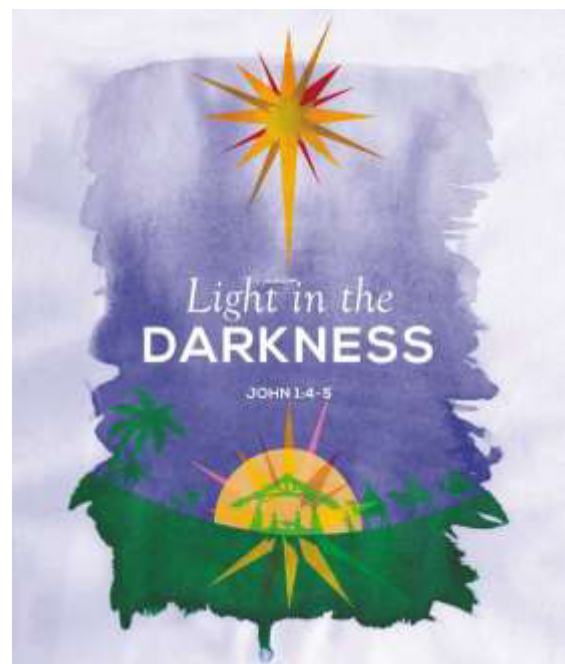
But we have only to turn to the Bible to see parallels. The Old Testament is a catalogue of destruction and disgraceful behaviour by the very people that God had chosen as His. Time and again he sends prophets to warn them that punishment is coming, but, like us, they are too busy feathering their nests and indulging in excesses – not to mention replacing Him with Gods of their own design. But in a world shattering once and for ever reaction, instead of punishment He sends His Son to pay the price. His promise is never to give up on His people, however badly they behave. It is the promise that should keep us focused whatever may be happening in the world around us.

With this in mind I have begun counting all the positives and instead of feeling that we are all sleep-walking to destruction I am confident that God does have a plan and nothing will get in the way of His positive outcome. There will be a brave new world where wickedness passes

away. Here are a few of the things that bring me joy in a bleak world:

- The stunning autumn palette in the countryside. Trees have never looked more beautiful.
- Art and Music – for all our apparent determination to destroy, man (and woman) continue a legacy, creating works of beauty and power. They move us to tears and make us think.
- Literature that continues to transport us to worlds beyond our own imagination. We can lose ourselves.
- Small acts of kindness. Friends and strangers taking the time to notice when we need a helping hand or a word of encouragement.
- The companionship of animals

These things are truly Light in the Darkness and remind us of God's existence. Where there is beauty, kindness and happiness He is reminding us that we are not abandoned. When you are feeling overwhelmed by man's inhumanity to man, make a list of the things that warm your heart – we don't have to look far to find God, but we do have to look.



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 1990-2000**

We have now arrived at what may be described as very recent history. It involves many of our present Church members and we all may have different memories of this time

It was an exciting time in that we had a new Minister. We stepped out in faith to extend and build a new Church building and strive to raise and pay off the money we owed. Church membership rose to over 100 and it was in flux, many new members and sadly we also lost a few, often committed workers who gave much for the cause of our faith and the Church.

Our new Minister, the Rev. Michael Heaney, who had formerly had a career in banking, was ordained and inducted on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1990. The story of the church building development I have described in the previous article. I do not intend to go over it, suffice to say that the Church had to adapt to great inconvenience, which meant worshipping at Batt Primary School Hall (now two classrooms) for the Sunday morning service and in the Long Room (now Base 33) for the evening service. With the completion of our new Sanctuary we needed new furniture, a new keyboard and a new sound system.

Having a Church Office was a challenging luxury. It needed organisation and it needed 'manning' five days a week. Originally a team of volunteers, with Mrs Sherry Bishop doing a lion's share, helped develop Church business. It was soon apparent that a paid part time Church

Administrator was needed. In July 1996 one of our members, Mrs Kay Hellens, was appointed and she continued until mid 1998 when she moved away. Her place was taken by Mrs Lesley Higgins who, shortly after, had to resign due to ill health. As a response to an advertisement Mrs Sue Birdseye accepted the post and, as at the time of printing, she continues to be, doing her job with diplomacy, efficiency and quiet but enthusiastic goodwill.

In the early years the monthly Church Magazine (The Cornerstone) was edited and produced by Anita & Graham Beechey and in 1994 Terry Powlesland ably took over this demanding task.

The post of Church Secretary was held by four people. Beryl Cartwright (1988-1993), Judi Holloway (1993-1997), Graham Beechey (1997-1999) and Jacqui Powlesland (1999- ). In January 1991 Mr Gerald Hayes took over as Treasurer from Dr Richard Paradine and continued until September 1997 when Mr Mark Hazell agreed to stand and was elected.

Over this period quite a few members were called and served on the Diaconate when difficult decisions had to be made. These members were: Mr Jack Field, Mr Graham Beechey, Dr Richard Paradine, Mr Gerald Hayes, Mr Pip Cartwright, Mrs Beryl Cartwright, Mr Stuart Allan, Mrs Joan Currie, Mr Ian Hayes, Mr Alan Catterall, Mrs Kay Nicoll, Miss Jenni Lumb, Mrs Janet Knight, Mrs Judi Holloway, Mr Lawrence Bee, Mrs Sherry Bishop, Mrs Susan Wass, Mr Douglas Allan, Mrs Jacqui Powlesland, Mr Peter Gamston, Mr Mark Hazell and Mr David Kinchin.

In 1997 Mrs Barbara Bridges from Fairford was accepted as a Student Pastor, which was a necessary element of her Ministerial Training, and took part in our church life for the year.

With the new buildings set up and the active growing Church developing, Rev.

Heaney requested a sabbatical. This was agreed and we learnt that there was to be an exchange with a South African Minister and his family, the Rev. Peter Hurter, Minister of the Port Shepston Presbyterian Church. This took place successfully between mid June 1997 and mid September 1997.

The Rev. Heaney was also the CWM representative for the Congregational Federation and attended various CWM Conferences abroad. During 1998 he asked the Deacons and Church if there was a possibility of being a part-time Minister as he wished to apply for the Assistant to the Congregational Federation General Secretary. This coincided with the placement of Mrs Suzanne Nockels as a Student Pastor, being part of her Pastor and Ministers Course at Mansfield College.

Suzanne and Keith Nockels had arrived at our Church from London and lived in the flat. Keith was employed as a Caretaker and Suzanne was involved in our Church Youth Work. On the completion of her course Suzanne eventually became the Minister at Market Harborough Congregational Church.

Over the ten years, many members were involved with Youth Work: Sunday School, Y.P.F., Pilots, the K.I.C.K. (Kids in Christ's Kingdom), and Noah's Ark. Rose Heaney was particularly active with the younger children. She was co-ordinator for the Sunday School for some time. She, with Sherry Bishop and Jenni Lumb, resurrected Pilots and in October 1994 she started Noah's Ark on a Monday morning with 16 children. This number rose to over 70 children and is still in existence and very successful.

For the older children, Y.P.F. and 14+ was run by Fiona Cartwright and Alan Catterall and later by Jerry Bishop, Jacqui Powlesland (SPECS) and Suzanne Nockels.

In September 1998 the Ecumenical Youth Trust (later renamed Base 33) was born and a Youth Worker, Anthony Sayles, was employed to develop Youth Work in Schools and Colleges. This work expanded and developed particularly under the leadership of Mrs Jude Levermore especially helping and supporting disenchanting teenagers in the Town.

A number of our members have been encouraged to develop their faith and Church skills by following the Congregational Federation Training Courses. Four have completed training to the highest level by becoming ordained: Alan Catterall (Shetland Isles), Suzanne Nockels (Market Harborough Congregational Church), Elaine Kinchin (Hope Congregational Church, Oldham) and Judi Holloway (Hospital Chaplain). Kay Nicoll successfully completed a Theological degree at Mansfield College and Julia Bee, Sherry Bishop and Val O'briain successfully completed the Foundation Course.

Sadly, some of our elder and most respected members passed away during this time. Mrs Elsie Auty died in December 1992 aged 95. She was the wife of a former Witney Congregational Church Minister (1939) who supported, worked and regularly worshipped at our Church ever since. She was the guiding light of the Ladies Guild. Since her death, money from the sale of her house has provided the investment for the Auty Trust. Mr Bill Hardcastle, Mr Jack Field (Church Secretary and Deacon) and Mr Bert Keates died in 1996. They were committed workers and pillars of our Church and will be sadly missed. Mr Derek Lindsay, Mrs Mary Honey and Mrs Anita Beechey all died in 1997. Mrs Honey was one of our oldest members and was a great worker in the time of the High Street Church. Probably the saddest death was Mrs Anita Beechey. Although she had joined the Church fairly recently she had made a big impact with

her commitment, energy and sympathetic deep faith.

As regards worship the mantle of organist fell heavily upon Mrs Kay Nicoll and the choir led by Mr Pip Cartwright did not sing every week but were able to enhance Services at Easter and Christmas.

The Social events were numerous. Judi Holloway produced two Roger Jones Christmas Musicals: 'Saints Alive' and 'Pharaoh to Freedom'. Mr Graham Beechey organised the annual Senior Citizens Outing and the Fireworks Night. Susan Wass organised a Skittles Evening most years and we enjoyed several barbeques, country walks (organised by Beryl Cartwright) and various other summer events. In 1992, 1993 and 1998 the Church enjoyed "a weekend away" at Barnes Close (Birmingham) where all ages mixed and got to know each other better.

As with all fellowships there were times of upset, misunderstanding and disagreement, especially regarding Baptism, Fellowship and Trustees. As I stated at the beginning I make no comment or no conclusions and leave that to future historians.

At the 1999 National Assembly in Nottingham, Rev. Graham Adams announced his retirement as General Secretary of the Congregational Federation. Our Minister applied for this post and was eventually appointed. After 10 years ministry at Witney Congregational Church he left to take up this most important post in July 2000.

In the year 2000, the flat was vacated and redecorated. The Church prepared to advertise for the post of a Caretaker/Cleaner/Maintenance with possible use of the flat in part remuneration.

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

## **Chinese Churches growing fast in the UK**

The Chinese Christian community is growing faster than any other part of the Church in the UK. In the last two years, 27 new congregations have emerged, as more people arrive from Hong Kong.

Almost 115,000 Chinese Christians are now worshipping in 201 churches in the UK.

Up to 200,000 British National (Overseas) visa-holders are expected to settle in the UK by the end of this year. Those arriving most recently from Hong Kong are more likely to join non-Chinese-language churches, according to a recent survey by Bible Society.

As one Chinese UK Christian has said, "We are seeing a time of incredible growth, which is also a missional opportunity, as others from within the Chinese community are drawn to the church. It is also a time when local English-speaking congregations can welcome people from Hong Kong to their services."

Three-quarters of Chinese Christians choose to worship in independent Evangelical Churches, and the majority consider Bible reading to be central to their faith and church experience. Most of them prefer a digital version of the Bible.

## **Christmas gifts**

Grandfather was talking to his granddaughter, "When I was a child all we got for Christmas was an apple and an orange."

The little girl clapped her hands in joy. "Brilliant! I'd love a new computer and a mobile!"

The following article, written by Canon David Winter, has been extracted from Parish Pump, and reflects on the coming of Jesus, and is entitled:

## **The Most Beautiful Story**

A well-known atheist was once interviewed on Radio 4. When asked how he spent Christmas, and he said that he went to Midnight Mass at church. 'But you're an atheist', his interviewer protested. 'Yes', he replied, 'but what they celebrate at Christmas is the most beautiful story ever told'.

That 'beautiful story' tells of a Creator who sent His Son to share the life of His creation, to be born as a helpless baby, to grow up as a man of extraordinary wisdom, gentleness and love, who was executed by the authorities for contradicting the traditions of the time. His followers – who today number about two billion people all over the world – believe that He rose from the dead, and that by His death and resurrection He has made possible forgiveness and eternal life for men and women everywhere.

That is certainly quite a story, perhaps the greatest story ever told, and yes, beautiful. And that is the story that will be rehearsed again this Christmas, in children's Nativities, in hymns and carols, in Bible readings and sermons all over the country. People who stay away from church all year turn up to hear it, and who can blame them? This is a story of hope, of love and of heaven touching earth.

Most of us are familiar with probably the best-known statue in the world, Christ the Redeemer, towering over Rio de Janeiro, His arms outstretched in blessing. Christmas celebrates the birth of that great Redeemer – a tiny baby laid in a feeding trough. His birth changed history, His life transformed our understanding of what it means to be human, His death was at one and the same time a tragedy and a triumph. Yes, 'the most

beautiful story ever told'. Enjoy it again this Christmas.

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Here is a new way of looking at Christmas wrapping paper...adapted from an article by Norma Murrain, and is entitled:

## **Christmas all wrapped up!**

"And this will be a sign to you, you will find the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Luke 2:2

Do you ever dread wrapping all those Christmas presents? The large roll of fragile paper that slides around on the table, the lumpy gifts that defy wrapping, the tape that sticks to your fingers... what is so important about wrapping presents, anyway? Why not just hand them over?

Well did you ever consider that the very first Christmas present EVER was wrapped up – in swaddling clothes? In biblical times, after a birth, the umbilical cord would be cut, the baby would be washed, rubbed with salt and oil, and then carefully wrapped in swaddling clothes. The swaddling is described as a cloth or blanket, tied together like bandages. This process was carried out with great love and care and was thought to have health-giving benefits.

On the other hand, to ignore the swaddling process was seen as abandonment and rejection. "And as for thy nativity, on the day thou wast born, thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to soothe thee. Thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all. (Ezekiel 16:4 KJ21)

So why wrap your presents? Because just as the baby Jesus was swaddled as a sign of great love and care, wrapping our gifts is a sign of our own effort, love, and care towards those whom we love. So be patient with the wrapping paper, and Happy Christmas!

## 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 this is the last Study in this series, 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.*

### 30. Mark 11: 12-26.

Mark now moves on to recount events which he places as occurring on the second and third days which Jesus and his disciples were to spend in and around Jerusalem. Two stories are interwoven together as well as a number of what may have been independently circulated sayings of Jesus which Mark decided were appropriate to include at this point in his narrative. One story, that of the barren fig tree, is depicted as taking place on two consecutive mornings while Jesus and his disciples are going into Jerusalem from their lodgings in Bethany. The other story, that of the cleansing of the temple, is set on the morning of the first of these two days, and is sandwiched between the two halves of the fig tree story. Subsequent events on the third and fourth day of the visit have no clear timetable in Mark's account until the beginning of Chapter 14 when he speaks of it being two days before the Passover, thus placing his

narrative on the fifth day of the week.

The story of the fig tree is one of the most difficult which Mark records of the activities and teaching of Jesus for us to accept as being a literal account of an event. If taken literally, the story shows Jesus in a most unreasonable light, behaving in what might well be described as a vindictive manner towards the fig tree. Apparently, Jesus looks for figs on this particular fig tree even although it is not the season for harvesting figs. When he finds no figs he curses the tree and, as a result, the tree withers and dies. If such were to be a true historical account of actual events, this story would reveal a very unpleasant streak in the character of Jesus. As an actual happening the story is "out-of-character" for Jesus. Perhaps Mark did not mean his readers to take the story literally but rather to see in it a reminder of the prophetic references (e.g Jer. 8:13; Hos. 9:10,16.) to Israel as a fig tree which would surely perish if it failed to bear fruit when God hungered for such fruit.

The key to understanding the story may be in verse 12 where Mark speaks of Jesus and his disciples coming from Bethany, and of Jesus being hungry. What might this say about the hospitality at Bethany? Had Jesus been given no breakfast? Are we meant to take this literally, or is Mark here indicating that Jesus is approaching Jerusalem, hungry to find the fruit of response to the love and goodness of God? Is the fig tree without fruit a symbol of what Jesus has found and is to find on entering Jerusalem and the temple, a barren religiosity with nothing to satisfy the deep spiritual hunger of humanity? Even as the fig tree was to wither, so would the people of Israel wither away because they had not provided fruit for a hungry world. Such is one possible interpretation. It may be that the story of

the fig tree was originally a parable of Jesus concerning the fate of a people who, like a fig tree which bore no fruit, would surely perish, a parable which by the time Mark recorded his account had been transformed into an event. Mark appends to the story sayings of Jesus (vv 22-26) which would appear to indicate that Mark understood the story in terms of the efficacy of faith and prayer, yet, taken by itself, the incident hardly furnishes a basis for the teaching found in these latter verses. Perhaps all we can take from this story is a reminder of the expectation which God has that his people should bear fruit.

Jesus comes into the temple not to look round, as Mark has described him doing on his first arrival there, but to act. He drove out those who were selling, and those who were buying in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money-changers. This commercial activity took place in the outer court which was the largest part of the temple precinct and was known as the Court of the Gentiles. This was the one area of the temple into which Gentiles were admitted. It was the one place in the temple where Gentiles as well as Jews could listen to and respond to teaching given about Israel's God. It had also become a convenient place for pilgrims to purchase the sacrificial animals and birds with which to make their offerings to God, and to change Greek and Roman coinage into the correct Jewish currency which they needed to pay the annual temple dues required from each Jewish male. It was a very convenient arrangement. Maybe it was also a somewhat exploitative arrangement with higher prices being charged than elsewhere. There is however not much evidence available to back up this suggestion; the trading seems to have been strictly

controlled and basically fair.

Nevertheless, Jesus thrusts out those engaged in this trade, not just the sellers, but the buyers as well. Also "he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple." Were those so doing, people who were making the temple a convenient short cut from one part of the city to another; a way of saving time and money in their busy business life? We don't know, but it could well be so.

Certainly the actions of Jesus can be seen to be about getting priorities right. Mark records him as quoting from Isaiah 56:7, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" and adding words which echo the condemnation of the failures of God's people as expressed in Jeremiah 7:1-11, "You have made it a den of robbers". The temple which should have been the exemplar of the faith of Israel showing forth a light to the Gentiles, had instead become an example of the failure of the Jews to live up to their high calling, and a place where the Gentiles were being squeezed out from even that part where they were supposed to be able to come to seek God. Religion had become a habit and a convenience rather than a living faith.

We may wonder what actual event in the temple formed the basis for this story which Mark records. It seems peculiar that one man could do all that the story indicates without there being any reaction by the authorities, particularly from the Roman garrison in the Fortress Antonia which overlooked the Court of the Gentiles, and from where guards were constantly on watch to suppress the least sign of trouble, particularly at Festival times. Perhaps the teaching which Jesus gave concerning the proper use of the Court of the Gentiles had, by the time Mark heard the story, been transformed into actions which Jesus performed. We

do not know, but the meaning of the story is quite clear. This visit to the temple also brought renewed or greater opposition from the chief priests and scribes. This is evident from Mark's assertion that when they heard about what Jesus was doing and saying they looked for a way to kill him. Such a reaction seems a bit extreme for simply disturbing commercial activities. Of more significance are the words, "They were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching." The word here rendered "spellbound" can also be translated as "astonished, astounded, amazed" and has previously been used by Mark at times when the teaching of Jesus has been so different from that which people had become used to hearing from the scribes and teachers of the law that they have discerned a new authority, a greater authority (q.v. 1:22, 6:2, 7:37, 10:26). It was the nature of his teaching, none of which Mark records at this point in his account, which apparently held the crowds for the rest of the day, teaching which the chief priests saw as a challenge to themselves.

Mark does not record any of the teaching of Jesus which he describes as holding the crowd spellbound. Rather does Mark append to the story of the fig tree teaching which he describes Jesus as giving to his disciples. This begins with Jesus saying "Have faith in God". Some manuscripts read "If you have faith in God" but the more common version with its positive emphasis seems better as a response to Peter's comment on the withering of the fig tree and as an introduction to the statements regarding prayer which follow. The first of these speaks of believing in your heart that that for which you pray will come to pass. It echoes a proverbial statement of the period about casting mountains into the

sea and is typical of the bold, figurative hyperbole of the teaching of Jesus. The place in which Mark reports this teaching as having been given may give it added significance. From the towering height of the Mount of Olives, the Dead Sea can be seen far below; casting this mountain into that sea could recall again the prophecy of Zechariah 14:4,8 where the Mount is cleft in two and a river flows down to the eastern sea. These things will be, in God's time, if we but have faith, for what is impossible to man, is possible for God (10:27). Perhaps however, "this mountain" has nothing to do with the Mount of Olives but is a figurative way of referring to the mountain of vested interest in an atrophied faith which Jesus was to face in Jerusalem. Jesus had come to Jerusalem to proclaim salvation for Israel, for all humankind; he believed that such salvation would indeed come to pass, that God's will would be done.

Mark pictures Jesus as continuing by saying, "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours". On the face of it this seems like an invitation to use the power of prayer for any purpose whatsoever. So to understand these words is to remove them from the context in which Mark sets them, the context of the humble entry into Jerusalem and of the growing opposition of the authorities. The power of prayer is vast but it is not to be used for selfish self-satisfaction. Prayer is always to be made in faith in the goodness of God, in his willingness to give that which we ask, but the asking should always follow upon the seeking as to what is the will of God for us and for others. It is in humility that we are to believe that we receive. The final section of teaching given here speaks of forgiveness in prayer, forgiveness to others if we are holding "anything against anyone" - a pretty



sweeping statement. "Forgive them" says Jesus. And do this every time you pray. That is what the introductory word "whenever" means. It is this forgiving of others which enables God to forgive us. Could it be also that without this forgiving of others, there will be little receiving of all else for which we may pray? This is where Mark concludes this section of narrative. Verse 26 no longer appears in most modern translations nor even in more recent editions of the Greek New Testament. It seems to have been inserted into some manuscripts at a latter date by a copyist intent upon emphasising the importance of forgiveness of others. The words are even more stark than those which Mark himself recorded. The verse reads: "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." Whereas Mark's record has about it the sense of a God who always desires to forgive but can find it impossible if we do not forgive others, this latter addition has about it a more legalistic slant, a sort of tit-for-tat approach which echoes more of the teaching of the scribes than that of Jesus who spoke with an authority unlike theirs (1:22). It is to the question of authority that Mark is next to turn as he continues to pose his question, "Who do you say this Jesus is?"



The following article has been submitted by Pat Brent, and is entitled

## **Starfish Malawi**

In a week before schools go back after the long holiday, Starfish have organized a Sports Bonanza. This reaches out to youth in the Community, with the Gospel taught through Sport. Approximately 16 Teams taking part in football and netball. 120 students are taking part this year. Large crowds came to Masalura School in Salima to watch the heavily contested games.

Since Starfish started the Bonanza, 154 children have taken part. The children's Clubs provide a safe environment for children to grow. They are taught a safe and better ways to live in a country where poverty is rife.

3 houses have been built for Everland teachers; 2 for maternity staff and 1 for the teachers. These are the first houses to be built on the community.

### **Movement for Good Awards**

There are 2 levels that can be nominated for; 1 for £1,000 and a special £5,000 award for churches working with children and young people to further their Interest in social problems and ways to prevent this affecting their lives. More of this in the future.



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

## The first-ever nativity scene

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

According to his biographer, Brother Thomas of Celano, Francis wanted people

to see what Jesus had "suffered for lack of the necessities of a new-born babe, and how He lay in the manger between the ox and ass."

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

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

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

Pope Francis has visited the spot two times: in 2016 and then in 2019, when he signed an apostolic letter on the importance of Nativity scenes.

You can read more on this story at:

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/253123/st-francis-and-the-story-of-the-first-nativity-scene>



## The Everlasting Turkey

On the first day of Christmas my true love  
said to me  
I've bought a big fresh turkey and a proper  
Christmas tree.

On the second day of Christmas much  
laughter could be heard  
As we tucked into our turkey – a most  
delicious bird.

On the third day of Christmas people came  
from just next door,  
The turkey tasted just as good as it had done  
before.

On the fourth day of Christmas came  
relations young and old  
We finished up the Christmas pud and had  
the turkey cold.

On the fifth day of Christmas, outside the  
snowflakes scurried,  
But we were nice and warm inside, and had  
the turkey curried.

On the sixth day of Christmas, the Christmas  
spirit died.  
The children fought and bickered – we had  
the turkey rissoles fried.

On the seventh day of Christmas my true love  
he did wince  
When he sat down at table - and was offered  
turkey mince.

On the eighth day of Christmas, the dog had  
run for shelter,  
For he'd seen our turkey pancakes and the  
glass of alka-seltzer.

On the ninth day of Christmas, by lunchtime  
dad was blotto,  
He knew that bird was back again, this time  
as a risotto.

On the tenth day of Christmas we were  
drinking home-made brew,  
Anything to help us face that steaming turkey  
stew.

On the eleventh day of Christmas our  
lovely tree was moulting,

And with chilli, soy and oyster sauce, the  
turkey was revolting.

On the twelfth day of Christmas we had  
smiles back on our lips,  
The guests had gone, the turkey too – WE  
DINED ON FISH AND CHIPS.



## Nativity Quiz Answers:

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

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

## **Viva: World Weekend of Prayer for Children at Risk**

Since 2010 I have volunteered for the international Christian charity, Viva, headquartered in Oxford. The focus of the work is children, particularly those who are vulnerable and at risk in cities. Viva encourages churches to work together in a city to deliver programmes and support for children.

There are two parts to my volunteering. I translate training materials and reports for the work across Latin America. I prepare a suite of resources for the annual world weekend of prayer that encourages children to pray for other children. Here are a few extracts of my recent report for the event last June.



### **1. The purpose of the World Weekend of Prayer is:**

- i) To improve the lives of children through GLOBALLY UNITED prayer to God
- ii) To facilitate children praying for children: surely God loves children praying; (*Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Mt 18:3*)
- iii) To put children out at the front to lead; (*Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, Psalm 8:2*),
- iv) To draw more churches into the city-wide networks.

### **2. It's a very big worldwide event!**

- 35 countries were involved (somewhere Viva is not directly present yet);
- 45 city networks of churches participated;
- About 4,300 churches and organisations got involved;
- 625,000 adults and children were at the events;
- This includes 350,000 children and young people

### **3. Everyone loved the 2023 theme: God's world – our home**

Activities embraced and expanded the central resources with imagination, e.g.:

- Daily or weekly messages in social media, WhatsApp etc in the month prior
- Devotional and study groups using the materials
- Prayer walks
- Cleaning up public parks
- Agro-ecological activities
- Slots in public radio and online radio
- Shadow art to illustrate God's creation
- Live online exchange between children in different countries



Zambia prayer walk

### **4. The central resources that I worked on are well used:**

- A 4-page prayer resource guide (translated 13 languages);
- A song especially composed: 'It's perfect all that he has made.' (In many previous years Heather has composed the special song);
- A 'creation' PowerPoint for use in talks with children and teenagers;
- Video clips and animations;
- Preparation prayer and Bible study resources for before the event.

## 5. It's all about lives transformed through prayer

Here is just one testimony of the many that came back :

*At first Merciya became nervous because of the crowd but later after seeing so many children of her age and other children leading and performing on stage, she felt confident to deliver her part in the programme. Seeing her confident and graceful deliverance, Merciya's mother, Mary, felt so happy and proud of her. Ms. Mary shared how in the community she lives; children are not given priority. Nepal*

## 6. Planning and preparing for 2024 (1-2 June)

In many countries follow up meetings after the 2023 event have taken place. I am now starting work on resources for next year's event. More information about Viva can be found at [www.viva.org](http://www.viva.org)

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:

### Follow the Star

Jesus' welcoming committee included Eastern scholars who learned about His birth through their study of astrology. I can't help thinking that the arrival of these people at Bethlehem is a link between a very early form of science (albeit mixed in with their own form of religion) and Christian faith. What better way to discover God than to explore the world and follow the evidence wherever it leads? But what exactly was the star of Bethlehem? Scientists have investigated this question over the centuries, coming up with a variety of answers.

First, there is the idea of a supernova: the massively bright explosion caused by a dying star. On rare occasions a supernova can be seen from Earth with the naked eye, remaining visible for several months. We now know that Herod the Great died around 4BC, so the actual date of Jesus' birth must be a little earlier. The supernovae that might match this timing were one in the Andromeda galaxy between March 8BC and September 7BC, and another in the constellation of Capricorn in the Spring of 5BC.

Next, comes a planetary conjunction. The alignment most commonly associated with the star of Bethlehem was between Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces in 7BC, but not everyone is sure whether this would be extraordinary enough to be the 'star' mentioned in the Bible.

Finally, the bright astronomical object that drew the Magi could have been a comet. This idea came from Sir Colin Humphreys, Professor of Materials Science at Cambridge University, and Oxford astronomer WG Waddington, who found that a comet was recorded by Chinese astronomers between March and May, 5BC. Humphreys then speculated that the 'no room at the inn' scenario came about because Jesus was born during Passover, and the Magi visited Jesus in May or June.

People interpret the biblical account of Jesus' birth in all sorts of ways, but there's very little argument from serious historians that Jesus of Nazareth actually existed. Whatever the true explanation for the 'star of Bethlehem' may be, there's plenty of evidence that an astronomical event could have happened at the time of His birth.

I think it makes perfect sense that if God was going to enter His own creation and take on the form of one of His own creatures, it should be marked by a very significant physical event!