

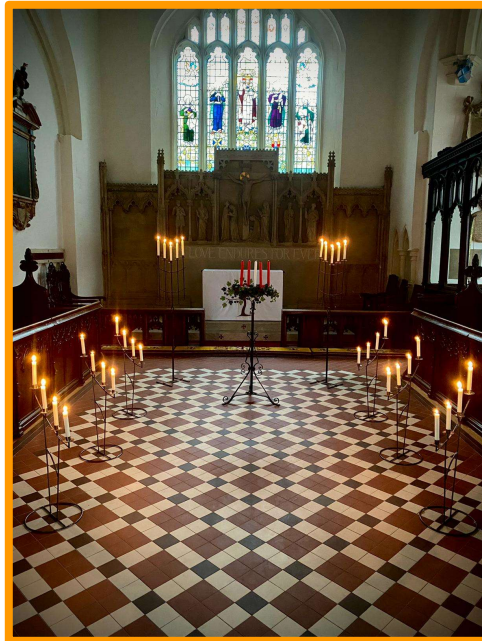
St Mary's, Watford



St Mary's News

December 2020

(still affected by the Coronavirus)



Includes

- Articles by Tony, Josh and Cath
- PCC Update by Roger Courtney
- Fitting out the Church Centre by Roger Courtney
- Mission News from the Middle East



Christmas will be different this year

The chances are Christmas will be different for many of us this year, but the true message of Christmas remains the same. As I reflect on that timeless story of the birth of Jesus, I am struck by how much of it resonates with the plight of the homeless and refugees. Government requirements often add to the difficulties and frustrations experienced by those who are homeless. In a similar way the census held at the time of Jesus' birth meant Mary and Joseph had no option but to go to Bethlehem. It would have been a difficult journey for someone heavily pregnant and it meant Mary could not give birth in her own home.

We all remember there is no room in the inn or perhaps more accurately there is no guest room. Mary and Joseph had to bed down amongst the animals. The baby Jesus is laid in the manger. Those who are homeless often rely on the kindness of others, but this may be limited to a sofa for a bed or perhaps a mattress in a parked van on the driveway.

It seems Jesus' birth goes unnoticed by most people in Bethlehem. Those who did notice were the shepherds who hurried to see the Christ Child having been told of his birth by angels. The first people invited to meet Jesus are not the rich and powerful but the lowly shepherds who themselves lived a hard life tending the sheep and living in caves.



Next to visit the baby Jesus were the wise men who come from the East, foreigners, outsiders and yet welcomed by Holy Family. Shortly afterwards Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus were forced to flee to Egypt, because of persecution. They have become refugees. It will be a long time before they can get back to that place they call home.

The Christmas story is one of God meeting us in our humanity. Not from a position of power, but one of vulnerability, a babe lying in a manger. It is a

symbol of hope, of new life and a declaration of God's love for all of humanity, identifying especially with the poor and vulnerable, those who are homeless and those who are refugees.

Perhaps we can spare a thought and say a prayer for those who are a long way from home or have nowhere to call home. Please pray for New Hope, Watford and Three Rivers Refugee Partnership and others who seek to help the homeless and the refugees in our community and please support their work if you can.

Christmas is a time for celebration, and what makes this time of year so special are all the traditions associated with Christmas such as carol singing, Christmas trees, switching on the lights, cooking the turkey, the visit of family and friends, mince pies, crackers, playing board games, parties, sitting down to watch the Queen's Speech or our favourite Christmas movie and so much more. As well as the more obvious traditions many families have their own special traditions that have built up over the years. Since I work on Christmas Day, as indeed does my sister who is a nurse, for the past twenty years or so our family celebration has been on Boxing Day. An even older tradition is to play consequences, at times an hilarious family game which brings the different generations together. For many of us the restrictions resulting from the pandemic will mean some of these cherished traditions will have to be curtailed. Larger family gatherings may need to be postponed until the spring or summer, and that might create a feeling of emptiness. It is never easy to be separated from those we love, and their absence is perhaps most keenly felt at Christmas.



Christmas will be very different this year and we will simply have to make the most of what we can do and adapt. I wonder how many new traditions will be formed this year as a result. Perhaps some of the changes forced upon us will be an improvement on previous years. Christmas is a busy time for all of us and I often feel we leave little time to actually engage with the true meaning of Christmas. Whilst I sincerely hope next year we will see the

resumption of all our Christmas services in church, and hopefully large attendances for those main events such as our lessons and carols and Christmas Day, I hope the enforced simplicity of what we do will bring extra significance and meaning.

I believe this is possible, and Josh's ordination is a case in point. Rather than the grand setting of the cathedral with all its pomp and ceremony it was a much simpler affair but no less significant. It was easier to be present in the moment and focus on what was important. It may not be what we would ordinarily choose, but we may well be surprised by how much we sense God being with us in our worship. At the time of writing the intention will be to have our Midnight Communion service on Zoom. Whilst it might not be ideal it does have the advantage of us being together as a church family while not having to leave the comfort of our own homes. In doing so I hope that it will generate a profound sense of Christ being with us in our own homes.

In a recent sermon I reflected in the telling of the Easter story as the women look into the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid, the angel announces that Jesus is not there. If Jesus is alive why would you look for him in the grave. With the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, except for a few shepherds and wise men from the East the birth of Jesus goes unnoticed by those who were in Bethlehem that holy night. No-one expected the Son of God to be born in a lowly stable. We find Jesus in the most unexpected places. Perhaps with many of our usual Christmas celebrations being curtailed we might discover Jesus in the quiet and simplicity of a very different Christmas.

In whatever way you celebrate Christmas this year may you know the love, joy and peace of the Christ Child.



The Revd Tony Rindl



Advent – expectation and preparation

So, here we are with a Christmas unlike any before on the horizon. The lights are up in town, decorations are outside people's homes and Christmas songs are being played on continual loop across



the nation. But in the church calendar we are not in the Christmas season we are in Advent. A season which, apart from the Advent calendar, tends to get scooped up into one long extended Christmas in the mainstream culture of Britain today. So, we see Advent and we just think and hear Christmas. One way this can be seen is that our culture assumes now that Advent is when we put the decorations up – when traditionally they are meant to remain relatively sparse and simple throughout this season. Now, I want to make clear I'm really not one of those people who gets hung up about all this, my Christmas decorations will, by the time you read this, more than likely be up already. But I do want to suggest that the spiritual journey of Advent is still one which, this year of all years, might be a helpful one for us to fully enter into in our own personal reflection and prayer.

This is because Advent is a season about expectation and preparation. Traditionally, it shares quite a lot of the same themes as Lent but rather than a focus on penitence and feelings of sorrow and regret towards things we have done, like in Lent, the focus here in Advent is instead more on the expectation of the coming of Jesus. The expectation of the coming of Jesus who is the light of the world. And light is a key theme of Advent. In the Northern hemisphere, where we are, Advent falls at our darkest time. I'm still surprised daily when I look outside mid-afternoon and it is already dark! And this means the imagery of light and darkness becomes even more powerful for us! At a time when we experience so much darkness in our



days, we expectantly wait and prepare for the coming of the light of the world.

This year, I know for most of us, has felt like a particularly dark year. A rare year when everyone has in some way experienced suffering. And after such a year I think it is easy to

be excited by Christmas and what it represents. That bright point in an otherwise dark calendar. The theme and imagery of light takes on an even bigger significance for us. But I want to suggest we don't rush to Christmas Day just yet. It is on the horizon but let us journey towards it. Much the same as with the vaccine for Covid-19. We are not to rush to change our habits now just because a vaccine is close on the horizon. The vaccine contains hope, but it is not fully with us yet. The journey of Advent is similar, we journey and reflect on the hope contained in Jesus' coming without allowing ourselves to celebrate it just now.

I think in the days leading up to Christmas it can be helpful to be reflective on the darkness we have experienced this year. It will be different for all of us. It is not something we probably want to think about and perhaps not all of us are in a position to think about it yet and that is fine. But now, for some of us, it might be an easier time to reflect on these things because unlike at any other time of the year we can think about it with the celebration of Jesus' coming close at hand. We can think about it with that amazing sign, party and celebration of light dispelling darkness directly on our horizon. It means however dark it might seem, light will break in, the party that is Christmas Day will happen! And it means we can allow the light Jesus brings, to dispel any of the darkness we are holding onto or are afraid to let go off in our lives.

When we journey in this way it means Christmas Day, the celebration of Jesus coming, becomes an opportunity to celebrate what the coming of the light of God into this world means for each of us on a personal level. The

chance to remind ourselves of the light Jesus brings into all and every part of our darkness. We will also find in this journey we follow the experiences of Joseph and Mary. A journey which must have seemed for them long, painful and dark. A journey containing a sense of abandonment, of being alone and of being afraid of the future. A journey which might resonate with many this year. And yet that journey, that incredibly humble journey to a small town called Bethlehem. A journey which was completed when a child was born into complete anonymity at the time. That journey and its result have now become a day marked by the loudest and brightest of celebrations in our calendar! Light coming into darkness!

So, in summary what I am trying to say is that this has been a difficult year. But instead of simply brushing it under the carpet, this might be a good time, with the knowledge of the celebration to come, to reflect on what we have experienced and allow God's light to expose things we may have missed or been unwilling to see. Things we can learn from and improve on into next year with all the hope that contains.

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people... the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world”

John 1

The Revd Josh Brocklesby



Experiencing Christmas

There is no denying that no matter how much we try to discern the latest COVID rules with regards to what we can and can't do and create convoluted algorithms in trying to work out which family members and friends we can meet up with and how, this Christmas will not be the easy, joyful, party-spirited, experience-filled season we were dreaming of. Added to all that, there will be so many this year who will be grappling with illness, loneliness, and the grief of lost ones. At the end of what has been a tumultuous, difficult, stressful year filled with many disappointments and sadnesses, Christmas seems to be set to be filled with much the same.



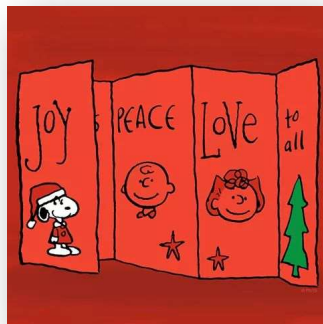
Like so many, we are clinging to Christmas traditions in an attempt to feel 'Christmassy'. In a house where we once only put the tree up on Christmas Eve, not only is the tree up and decorated but so is much of the house; we drive to school and work listening to Christmas Carols; and the girls have created their own Advent calendar filled with suitably Christmas

activities like making gingerbread houses, Christmas cards and homemade decorations.

One of my favourite Christmas traditions is the retelling of stories. There are the family stories like that time Aunt Ethel fell asleep in the punch and there are the stories we retell through our services - and it made me wonder: which version of the Nativity story will you be telling this year? Will it be the 'fairy-tale' happy ever after story we tend to tell our children - the one that culminates with the pretty traditional setting with a happy Mary and Joseph, surrounded by the shepherds, the three kings and an angel or two? Or is it the more realistic one? The story of an unwed mother trying to deal with being ostracised, the uncertainty of a strained relationship with the man who was supposed to be her husband and disappointment when, rather than giving birth in comfort surrounded by friendly faces, she went into

labour at the end of a difficult, exhausting journey only to give birth in a stable. The story that is set in the middle of political upheaval and chaos where people were struggling with poverty and social restraints. The story that did not end with a ‘happily-ever-after’ but saw a young family become refugees, fleeing from state sanctioned genocide which murdered thousands of babies. We may retell it as a story, but what happened that very first Christmas was very real – it was gritty and chaotic and messy and filled with uncertainty and disappointment and sadness – Mary and Joseph and the other ‘characters’ must have felt very much as we do today. What is more, through the living link, which is Jesus, we can truly experience that first Christmas ourselves – not just the hardships and hopelessness but the hope, joy and peace which Jesus brought.

For us, struggling just to survive this season, we have a great need to experience Jesus and the message of hope, joy and peace he brought into the world that first Christmas. So, what is it that helps us ‘experience’ something like Christmas? It is those time-honoured traditions; the activities that are special to the season such as decorations, Christmas pudding, carols; it is in the storytelling; is it in the connecting through the services / food / family gatherings? Or is it in that moment of quiet in the middle of the hubbub of activities where we reflect on what this story truly means to us as individuals and in our lives?



How often do we end up feeling overwhelmed by all that we ‘need to do’ over Christmas – how often do we find that we did not have time to stop and appreciate and truly experience things? Ironically, this year we do have time! One of the things that has really struck me this year is that while events and activities may not be the way we would have planned them, because of the minimalistic nature forced on us by COVID, often what we do engenders a greater impact and creates an even deeper sense of experience. As Tony has already expressed in sermons and elsewhere, this

was particularly tangible at Josh's ordination. While I am sure there were disappointments due to things not being done as at first expected, the service that was created was one which held a deep, intimate sense of God's presence, love and blessing for all present which may have been lost in the more usual setting of St Albans Cathedral.



Last year together we put on an amazing event called 'Discovering Christmas' – it was an opportunity for each person to explore and find their own meaning of Christmas. This year I invite to you come and 'Experience

Christmas'. You may say that having read the above actually you already are! – but I mean something far deeper, spiritual, elemental. This year we have tried to design a range of activities and events through which you can come and experience Christmas for yourself. Each of us is different when it comes to engaging in our faith and with God and so we have tried to incorporate as many as we could think of (while complying with COVID advice of course) so that as many as possible can find a moment just for themselves where they can meet with God personally and find in that moment that hope, joy and peace which only God can provide, and which all of us hunger for after the year we have lived through. We have tried to keep as many of our usual services such as 'The Jesse Tree', Christingle and 'Lesson and Carols' just to name a few (check out Tony's newsletter for all our services and full details) and we have added some new ones – there is a Forest Church on 20th December where we will use the Whippendell Woods as a part of our worship, a Crib service on Christmas Eve and an event: 'A time to reflect'.

This last event will culminate on Christmas Eve and will comprise of a number of prayer spaces which will be set around the outside of St Mary's Church so that they can be easily and safely accessed - with a final one within the Church itself to provide a focus for prayer for during our open-for-prayer times. Each prayer space will also have a QR code which you can either access from the prayer station in question or from our website (for

those who are unable to visit the prayer stations in person). Please keep an eye on the newsletter for more information on when the prayer stations will come online, but in the meantime, I need your help! I would love for volunteers to be involved: this could be in recording a part of a story for the website, or a song which we can use during this event, it could be in setting up the stations (anyone handy with a jigsaw?) Please do contact me if you can help in anyway.

It would be too easy to feel down this Christmas – too easy to feel hopeless this year, but I challenge you not to! I challenge you to hold onto that hope which we see the characters of that first Christmas story holding onto and which Jesus came into the world to represent – it is the hope of love: the love of our Eternal Parent who has loved us unconditionally and as only a father could since the dawn of time, the love which saw our Loving Father send His only son to die for our sins, the love that cuts through all the disappointments and grief our world of chaos and uncertainty engenders even death itself, a love so powerful it can set us free.

I pray that your and your family's Christmas is one of hope, love and peace.

Merry Christmas and God Bless

Cath
(07961564382 /
familyworker.stmaryswatford@gmail.com)



PCC Report – Meeting on 16th November

The PCC met for a fifth time by Zoom. The principal subjects discussed are outlined below.

Buildings Roger Courtney provided an update on buildings matters but the main discussion concerned the renewal of flooring and ceilings in the Church Centre and the installation of a new cooker, for which estimates had been obtained. The intention was to carry out these works before March while we were sure that the VAT element of costs could be reclaimed. The Council agreed that the present state of the Church Centre was very poor and that the works should proceed, with costs being met from grants and an appeal to the congregation but underwritten by the Development Fund.

Finance Peter Dean reported that, as in previous months, both income and expenditure continued to be below budget. However, some expenditures fell due towards the end of the year and he was currently forecasting that without an exceptional donation received earlier in the year we would have been ending the year in deficit. He also noted that because of previous deficits the balance in the General Fund was approaching the sum set by the church's reserves policy. The consequence was that there would be little scope for running deficits in future years. This had implications for the Budget.

Budget Peter presented a first draft of the 2021 budget, emphasising that it was particularly difficult to come to a view on income and expenditure because of the exceptional circumstances. Income from the congregation had not increased significantly for some years, while expenditure on fulfilling our mission had increased because of inflation and other factors. The end result was a significant predicted deficit. The Council considered different aspects of the budget, noting that some expenditure and income figures needed to be adjusted in the light of information currently being sought. Peter was asked to present a revised budget at the next meeting,

Pre-School Alison Saunders provided an update on the Pre-School. The number of children attending this term continued to be low and this had

affected income. The decrease appeared to stem largely from the impact of Covid-19 on families and further examination of the situation was required.

Opening of the church The Vicar thanked everyone who had contributed to the preparations for the Sunday morning service on 1st November. Much had been learned that would be relevant when services were again possible. Planning for Christmas services was in hand; their format would need to be simple, but they would be no less meaningful because of that.

Interfaith Pilgrimage The Vicar commended the video of the virtual interfaith pilgrimage which had taken place the previous day. This would be placed on YouTube. The virtual event had provided many insights into other faiths in Watford and had demonstrated the close relationships that existed in the town among different faith communities.

Safeguarding The Council noted that under the latest guidance not only PCC members but leaders and deputy leaders of Connect Groups needed to have DBS checks.

Roger Courtney

Fitting the Church Centre **for the future**

Tony's newsletter on 17th November outlined the PCC's plans for Church Centre improvements and urged everyone to support these through helping to fund them. This note provides more detail about what is intended and why we are doing it now.

Whatever shape our mission takes in the future, we will need meeting spaces that can serve our needs and those of our local community. The Church Centre has provided these for more than 40 years and, while it may not be the perfect building, the cost of replacing it would exceed the sum that we have spent on the church. So we need to ensure that it is fit condition for

the future. Everyone would agree that it has been looking very tatty for some time now, with holes in the ceilings and some of the floor tiles breaking up. It has not reflected our desire to honour God in all that we do and in the way we care for his world and all that is in it.

Until last year, our focus was on transforming the church building, and then when we were able to turn our attention to the Church Centre, the first priority was to cure the water leaks by renewing the roofs. That has now been done, with great assistance from the Church Lands Trust, and with all the rain this autumn the new roofs have been well and truly tested!

So now – at last – we can start to bring the interior of the Church Centre up to the standard that we would expect to see in our own homes. We can't do everything at once but the PCC is determined to make a start by tackling the areas that are crying out for attention, particularly the ceilings and floors. And finally to install a new cooker - which would have happened by now had the coronavirus not brought everything to a stop.

The work needs to be done while the Pre-School is not in session and so the intention is that over the Christmas break all the tiled floors will be replaced with new vinyl flooring and then during the February half-term all the damaged ceilings (lounge, tiled area, stairs, upper corridor) will be replaced. At the same time, new lighting will be installed and the fire alarm system brought up to current requirements. The cooker will be fitted around then also.

One other change will be made. We really do need to have children's toilets that can be accessed from the Pre-School area – at the moment, children needing the toilet have to go out into the corridor in order to use the ladies' toilets. This is not only inconvenient for everyone but is also not good from the point of view of safeguarding. So one day, when we have the money, we will convert the cleaner's cupboard into a children's toilet.

At present, though, the door to the cleaner's cupboard is off the lobby and so we need to bring the entrance to the Pre-School/Sunday School area forward so that this door is behind it, If we do that after the new floor is

laid, it will leave holes in the floor. So we are doing it now. It would of course be wonderful if the toilets could be installed as part of the present works, but at the moment we don't have the money for that. However, if everyone were very generous.....

Why are we doing these works now? Partly because the tax concession under which we can reclaim VAT on building works is due to end at the end of March. It may of course be renewed but with the pressure on public funds caused by Covid-19 we cannot be certain of that. Doing the works now will ensure that we can save the £7000 or that we might otherwise pay in VAT. But also we are looking to the time – hopefully by the middle of next year – when we can once again use the Church Centre. When we do, how good it will be to see new ceilings and floors and to be able to use the new cooker – what a lift to the spirits.

From the estimates received, these works will cost something over £35,000. We have around half that sum already - £15,000 in grants from charitable trusts and more than £3,000 from the appeal for the cooker. So the gap is around £20,000 which is the figure that appeared in the Tony's newsletter. For the moment, the PCC has agreed to draw on the Development Fund for this extra money. But that's only a temporary measure – we need to replace that money so that it can be spent on the development of our mission.

Please read Tony's words about the appeal very carefully and prayerfully. I hope that this note has filled in for you the details of what we are proposing to do, and why; if you have any questions, then do be in touch with me and I will seek to answer them.

Let's praise God for all that he has enabled us to achieve and look forward to our first after-church coffee in the 'new' Church Centre.

Roger Courtney



News from the Middle East



"كَيِّيه؟" - "Who is it?"

This is the question everyone calls out as they go to answer a knock at their gate on the street.

You never know who it will be and sometimes you have to switch from Kurdish into Arabic.

Sometimes it is a neighbour or friend with a plate of food.



The plate will be returned later with a portion of home cooking. (I am convinced we always receive the best in these deals.)

The other day it was a stranger, a lady dressed like so many with a black 'abaya' outer covering. Her name was Fatima, and she was asking for sugar. We don't give money, nor sugar, but we have a stash of milk powder ready to give. So I gave her the bag of milk powder, telling her something of the God who has given us so very much, and is made known through Jesus the Messiah.

She was grateful and asked me if I would like to know my future - she was offering to read my hand. I tried to explain that I don't want to know what will happen next month or next year, because I know that God loves me so much and that He has promised to keep me safe.

'Why have you come here?' she asked.

'Because God wants you and other people to know His loving kindness,' I answered.

As we enter the last month of 2020, with all its troubles, we are thankful to the Good Shepherd who has protected us and guided us, even through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus the Good Shepherd was the theme of the 2020 scripture calendar produced by Biblica here in the Kurdish region of Iraq, with the focus on the saying of Jesus, "*I am the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep.*"

For the 2021 calendar, which was planned from back in February, we have moved on to the adjacent saying, "*I am the door of the sheep, ...*" and the theme of God opening a door for us. With the trials that Kurdistan and all the world has faced, we wondered whether this was appropriate. But in discussion, we were told about the Kurdish expression that is used as a prayer when we are in a hard place:

(نه‌ی خوایه، ده‌رگایه‌کمان لی بکاته‌وه)!

"Oh God, open a door for us!"



This then became the starting point for the text that comes on the back of the 2021 calendar. For this year, with reduced funding, we have done a smaller print run of 20,000 copies of only one design, a Kurdish-Arabic diglot, for all of Iraq, North and South.

Sometimes the children of our new neighbours next door have asked me, ‘Are you an Arab? Or are you a Kurd?’ There are now many Arabs

living in our city who have been displaced by conflict in the South. The society is ethnically divided and often suspicious. (This family is in fact neither Arab nor Kurd, but part of the Dom people, akin to the Romani people, with their own language which they speak at home.)

May we, along with the Kurdish and Arabic and Dom speaking people here, learn to take up his invitation:

*“Ask and it will be given to you;
seek and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened to you.”*

Happy Christmas!

*With our love,
K & S
in the Middle East*

If you want to know more about S&K please contact Caroline Jones via the church office



Services

We are sorry that the church building
will remain closed for most of the week;
it should be open Private Prayer
but please check before coming;
Public Worship is resuming in December

Private Prayer

Wednesdays and Saturdays
12.00noon to 2.00pm
(but times may change)

We will continue to
pray, worship and care for each other
from our homes during this difficult time.

Sunday

10.30 am Morning Service via Zoom;
also a service in church for a limited number of people
4.00 pm KidsChurch via Zoom
5.30 pm Reflection via Facebook

Wednesday

12.30 pm Reflection via Facebook; also on the screen in Church
followed by Holy Communion in Church

Monday to Saturday

Morning Prayer via the Church website

Please keep up to date with what is on offer
via our Facebook page
or the website www.stmaryswatford.org

Who's Who at St Mary's

(They all continue to be available via the phone or online)

Vicar

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Curate

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Churchwardens

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Peter Dean | 07876 154387

Children & Families Worker

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