

Straplines

A reputation is not so much built on what we do, but on who and what we are.
If it wasn't for the last minute, such a lot of things wouldn't get done.
Leisure is a beautiful garment, but it will not do for constant wear.
Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.
(Martin Luther King)
Many people can stand adversity, but if you want to test character, give them power. *(Abraham Lincoln)*
Never look down on anyone unless you are helping them up.
The human brain is a wonderful thing. It starts working the moment you are born, and never stops until you stand up to speak in public.

Time for a Smile

A couple in the church received a lovely vase to celebrate 50 years of both of them being involved in a variety of church activities and holding a number of important positions. Unfortunately the wording on the card suffered from a lack of punctuation, and on looking at it when they returned home, they discovered it read, "With our thanks to you both and may the Lord bless you and keep you from the Vicar and members of the Parochial Church Council."

A father and his small son were travelling together one day, and the son asked, "Dad, how high can you count?" The father replied, "Well, I don't know, son -- how high can you count?" The son immediately replied, "One thousand, five hundred, forty-two." The father said, "Why did you stop there?" The son shrugged his shoulders and said, "That's when the sermon stopped last Sunday."

A Lesson in Humility

The wise men got it wrong.
It is much harder to receive
than to give.

Francis Copsey



Dear Friends,
It's good to be back!

The last three months, which in plan A were about sabbatical, study and travel turned out in plan B (Z?) to be about something very different.. The six weeks attending hospital with Debbie pretty much every weekday were intense and didn't leave a huge amount of time for much else, though we managed some fun times too. Notably Debbie and I went both to Manchester and Glasgow for special celebrations.

The whole experience of this last year has been for me a reminder that although making plans can be a very good thing, and particularly important in looking ahead for ourselves as a church community, plans have a capacity to be undermined or changed constantly.

Adaptability and flexibility are very important in our daily lives as we meet the challenges each day offers us. Over coming months the diocese of Birmingham, of which we are a part, faces challenging times. Finance as always is an issue and has sharpened greatly. As part of the diocese, we together with all the other churches will be wanting to work together and with the senior staff to find the best ways that the good news of Jesus can be shared, that God can be worshipped and communities served. There will be need for adaptability and flexibility and a lot of prayer.

Listening to God in the midst of difficulty or crisis is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Faith is not just for the good times or what we get from it but about encounter with the living God who calls us constantly into new being. So a one year ends and another begins we stand firmly with our God and Saviour and walk into the future with faith.

George VI's speech as 1939 ended quoted a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins which is very relevant today in our world, church and communities.

*And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."*

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way." So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East."

So may we place ourselves in God's hands in loving trust.

Priscilla

Aspects of life at St Faith and St Laurence

Morning prayer – is normally said Monday to Thursday and Saturday at 8.15 am in the Lady Chapel. We use Common Worship Daily Prayer, all are welcome to come and join in.

Reflections A chance to meet together over a cuppa and reflect on the Gospel reading for the previous Sunday. A group meets on Mondays from 1.45-3pm Venues are listed in the Programme of the month.

Task Groups – The church has a number of task groups enabling areas of church life. These are listed in the magazine with the contact details of the chairs. If you would like to be a part of a groups please contact the relevant chair or Priscilla. All are welcome to join.

Stay and Play meets on Thursday between 9.30 and 11am in the Hall to give a chance for people with young children to meet and the children to play. All are welcome. Cost £1.50 per family.

Sunday Club meets on the first and third Sundays of each month except during the holidays. We hold an extra Sunday Club on days when there is a baptism. All are welcome to join in hearing and experiencing a Bible Story and learning together about what it means for our daily lives.

Messy Church takes place on the first Saturday of each month, most months. A chance for children and parents/ carers to have an informal time of worship, and discovering about a Bible story through song, craft, listening, cooking and so much more. Dates are published in advance and all are welcome to come along.

Planned Giving helps people make giving regular. You decide how much you can afford to give. You can join the envelope scheme weekly or monthly or pay by Standing Order or annually by cheque. Income tax payers are asked to Gift Aid their giving, so the Church can reclaim the tax on their donations at no extra cost to the donors. For details, contact Jackie Taylor or Brenda Stott

Call in for Coffee time together over a cuppa on a Wednesday morning from 10.30 -12.00. if needed we can arrange for someone to collect you and then take you home. Please ring Pauline Sitford (427 7005). If you are passing, do call in, or bring a friend, all are welcome.

We support **Recycling**. We have a special collection on the first Sunday of every month when we collect ALUMINIUM cans and foil which can be sold and the money raised is donated to our Mission Partners in Chile (through USPG) We also have envelopes for recycling mobile phones again supporting USPG. Pauline Sitford (427 7005).

At the start of a New Year-Count Your Blessings

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness,
You are more blessed than the million who will not survive the week.
If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture or the pains of starvation,
You are ahead of 500 million people around the world.
If you can express your beliefs without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death,
You are more blessed than almost 3000 million people in the world.
If you have food in your refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep,
You are richer than 75% of this world.
If you have money in the bank, in your wallet and spare change somewhere,
You are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.
If your parents are still married and alive,
You are very, very rare.
If you hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful,
You are blessed because the majority can, but most do not.
If you can hold someone's hand, hug them or even touch them on the shoulder,
You are blessed because you can offer God's healing touch.
If you own just one Bible,
You are abundantly blessed. One third of the world does not even have access to even one.
If you can read this message,
You are more blessed, than over 2000 million in the world that cannot read anything at all.

Anon.



News from our Mission Partners, Audrey and Colin Gibson in Lebanon

There have been many news reports recently of Islamic State being pushed back in Syria, Iraq and here in Lebanon, This may give the impression that life is returning to normal in these places, but, even were that true, these conflicts have had devastating effects on the lives of millions of people which will take a long time to heal. Sometimes a personal story captures the bigger picture, so we wanted to share one. While visiting friends, we were introduced to a Syrian family they were helping. The wife smiled faintly but we could see and sense in her eyes some of the sadness and hardship that she was bearing.

The family had become caught up in the conflict in Syria and had witnessed the killing of two of their five children. The husband was also detained and tortured although somehow he managed to survive, unlike his five brothers, who were all killed in front of him. He was eventually released although, unsurprisingly, he suffers from post-traumatic stress and other psychological problems. Our friend went on to describe how the lady was so traumatised that when she first recounted her story she was unable to shed any tears. It wasn't until our friend broke down that she too began to cry. At the time, all five members of the family were living in a small room with a hard concrete floor, a toilet at one end, a single light bulb and almost no furniture. Thankfully the family are now getting some help: a Syrian neighbour has been cooking for them and since our visit they now have mattresses, a small cooker and some basic kitchen equipment. Sadly, the emotional and psychological effects will take a lot longer to resolve -although it was encouraging to see their 11 -year-old son smiling and clearly pleased to have visitors.

Through CMS we were put in touch with Windsor Church Fellowship who had been collecting secondhand clothing with the hope that it might be useful to Syrian refugees here in Lebanon. One church member is also a member of staff at Eton College and through the college's newsletter, he asked for and received many gifts of clothing to go with those collected by the church. Another church member is a pilot with a major airline and he volunteered to bring six bags of clothing on a flight to Beirut. Colin met the pilot at Beirut Airport one evening to collect the bags. He was not hard to spot as he some crew members came into the arrivals hall wheeling the six large bags. We later deliver some of the clothing to the Life Center Church in Beirut. This is the church where new CMS mission partners Phil and Sylvie Good hope to start working next year. The church, in a poor part of Beirut, ministers to a large number of Syrian refugees. We also took two bags to Emil and Reem, CMS local partners who a minister to local Syrian families. We are very grateful to everyone involved and pleased to have played a small part in providing some help to those in great need.

Home Communion We have a team of lay people trained and able to bring Home Communion usually on a monthly basis. This is for those who are unable to come to church long term. If the situation is more temporary for example after an operation you can also receive communion, usually from Priscilla. In either case please contact Priscilla.

Traidcraft

Traidcraft sells a range of fairly traded food, cards, clothes and accessories. We use Traidcraft tea and coffee and everything we buy helps fight poverty and supports our church. You can order seasonal gifts through the church at Christmas time when catalogues will be available. Any questions, please ask Ruth Jeavons or Bronwen Jones.

'easyfundraising'

Next time you shop online, think of St Faith and St Laurence and raise free donations with 3,000+ retailers:

<https://www.easyfundraising.org.uk/causes/stfaithandstlaurence>

Women's Fellowship meets on the first Monday of the month from March to December. Meetings are held in the Committee Room 7.30 for 8pm. We have talks on a variety of subjects. See Programme of the Month for details.

Prayer Ministry Team

Prayer ministry is offered during the 10am Communion on Sundays. People can receive prayer for themselves or for any situation that is important to them. It takes place in the Lady Chapel during the distribution of communion.

Service with no name

This takes place on the first Thursday in the month in church at 7.30pm.

Foodbank

We collect food for the Quinton and Oldbury Foodbank. There is a box in church and food can be placed there at any time. The list of things that are needed is in church and in the hall. Food is distributed from St Boniface Church on Wednesdays and Paul and Barney's place on Fridays. Vouchers are required to receive food.

Choir and Music.

Choir Practice takes place weekly, normally on Thursdays 6-7pm. Anyone interested in singing in the choir should contact Simon Palmer, Organist & Choirmaster. (Contact details on page cover) We also like to encourage instrumentalists to perform in church, either in services or in concerts.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

This runs from 18th -25th January each year There will be posters advertising events in the different local churches to which all are invited. Please do try and get to something, especially....

Churches Together Unity Lunch

This annual event is taking place at St Faith and St Laurence this year. We will set up after the morning service and aim to begin at 1pm. We will be hosting and providing soup and hot drinks. it is a bring and share meal so everyone simply brings a contribution. It is a good opportunity to meet people from the other churches and have some fellowship together. We will be asking for a few volunteer to make teas and coffees on the day.

CHURCHWOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP



The Fellowship concluded a very successful year with a lovely Christmas lunch at the Half Penny Farm pub in Oldbury on 7th December. There were 18 of us, which included 7 men, as a number of the ladies had other things booked.

We don't meet in the winter months so will start again in March - watch out for the new programme later. Any lady who would be interested in giving us a try will be made very welcome, we meet on the first Monday of the month at 7.45pm in the Committee Room.

Helen Hayward.

We're gathered digitally today

The Church of England now reaches more people via social media than in services, new figures reveal. The statistics suggest the Church has now reached the point where more people follow its online accounts than attend regular services. Around 1.1 million attend services at least once a month, while the Church estimates 1.2 million people are "reached" every month via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. The figures showed that the decline in regular church attendance continued in 2016, with average Sunday attendance falling to a new low of 780,000 people. Over the same period the Church has tripled its followers on both Facebook and Instagram.

But it admitted it was struggling to convert a growing digital audience to physical attendance. William Nye, secretary general to the General Synod, said the figures were a "sobering reminder" of the challenge faces by the Church. He said that while the internet was an area of growth, "our challenge is to join up that growing online church life to the physical community of church that forms the body of Christ".

The figures also showed that another area of growth was midweek services, at which attendance by people who did not go on Sunday increased from 111,800 in 2011 to 122,700 in 2016. The rise is thought to be partly explained by the growing popularity of services such as choral evensong, which is held in urban cathedrals and attracts young professionals.

Christian charities free to speak about faith

Tracey Crouch, the minister for civil society, has told Christian charities they needn't worry about hiding their faith while carrying out services. With concerns that some would miss out on funding or face punishment, many charities have been wary about how explicit they can be about the faith element of their work. Speaking at the Raising Funds for Christian Charities and Churches conference in London, Tracey Crouch acknowledged there had been problems in the past but she wanted that changed. She said, "I know that some of you here feel that successive governments and local authorities have wanted to applaud all the good things that you do as Christians, but discourage you from speaking openly about the faith that motivates you, I assure you that that is not the intention and I encourage you to challenge anyone in government who makes you feel you need to suppress your faith. I very much appreciate that, for so many of you, the inspiration to do such amazing acts of service in your communities comes directly from your Christian faith."

Suitable Presents

If it's the thought that counts,
What were they thinking of
To give him these,
Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh?
Extraordinary gifts to give a child.
When Mary pondered, later on these things,
I wonder if she thought that
These are given to all –
Gold: our potential, gifts that make us
Royal, each in our own domain;
Incense: our aspirations, prayers
And dreams, calling us on;
Myrrh: soothing healing for our pain,
Not gifts for child,
But, like him, we'll grow.

Ann Lewin

Some strange notices

On the bottom of a Tesco's Tiramisu dessert... 'Do not turn upside down'
On Sainsbury's peanuts... 'Warning: contains nuts'
On Boot's Children's Cough Medicine... 'Do not drive a car or operate machinery after taking this medication'
On Marks & Spencer Bread Pudding... 'Product will be hot after heating'
On a Sears hairdryer... 'Do not use while sleeping'
On a bag of Fritos... 'You could be a winner! No purchase necessary. Details inside'
On some Findus frozen dinners... 'Serving suggestion: Defrost'
On packaging for a Rowenta iron... 'Do not iron clothes on body'
On Nytol Sleep Aid... 'Warning: may cause drowsiness'
On Christmas lights... 'For indoor or outdoor use only'
On a child's Superman costume... 'Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly'

Prayer of the month

Something that has come more to the forefront over the last few years, or maybe I've just started to notice it, is the idea of "Blue Christmas". This is a service, often held on or around the longest night (21st December). It is particularly offered for those for whom the jollity of Christmas is a bit much and offers a quiet, reflective alternative (or supplement) to the more festive aspects of the season. It is offered for those who are living with grief, or living in darkness. Placing it at the point when the world is darkest is a good way to symbolise and remind people that after darkness comes dawn and that God is present in darkness too.

As we head into a New Year we have no idea what that will bring but we are reminded by the Christmas story that God is with us, with u in the journeying, with us in the waiting, with us in pain and in joy. So a prayer for the New Year is a simple Celtic blessing

Deep peace of the running wave to you,
Deep peace of the flowing air to you
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you
Deep peace of the shining stars to you
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you,

May this Christmas season, and the coming year enable you to meet God in the very depths of who you are, not just on the surface when all is well but in the turmoil too.

Priscilla



Looking at the world up downside up

They have no need of our help
So do not tell me
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
Should life have dealt us a different hand
We need to see them for what they really are
Chancers and scroungers
Layabouts and loungers
With bombs up their sleeves
Cut-throats and thieves
They are not
Welcome here
We should make them
Go back to where they came from
They cannot
Share our food
Share out homes
Share our countries
Instead, let us
Build a wall to keep them out
It is not okay to say
These people are just like us
A place should belong to those who were born here
Do not be stupid to think that
The world can be looked at another way

(Now read this from bottom to top)

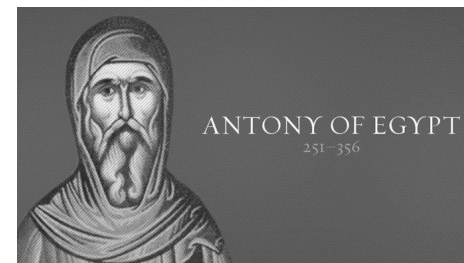
Brian Bilston

Christmas is a time for us to draw near,
As Jesus Christ will soon be here
His blessings He bestows on us all,
So come to Him when you hear His call.
For our salvation is not far away,
And He is closer when you stop and pray.

Neville Ronsler (a member of our Wednesday congregation)

Saints and such

7 January Anthony of Egypt (251 -356)



If your Christmas and New Year break included just too many people and even a bout of indigestion, then St Anthony may be the saint for you.

He was a hermit-monk with a reputation for making poorly people feel better. Anthony was born in Coma (Upper Egypt) in 251, and at 20 became an ascetic. He settled down in the complete solitude of a deserted fort in Pispir, where he spent the next 20 years busy fighting the whole range of usual hermit temptations, such as having queenly devils approach you for marriage, and other hazards like that.

In 306 Anthony felt able to face the world again, and so he began visiting with some other hermits. One was Paul, and the story goes that the day they met, a raven provided lunch for them by dropping a loaf of bread nearby.

Anthony was a godly man, and would pray for people. Stories went round that those he prayed for were healed, and so he became known as a miracle-worker. He was certainly brave: when in 311 the Roman Emperor Maximinus was persecuting the Christians, Anthony went to Alexandria to encourage the church there to stand firm. Years later he was stoutly defending the Christian faith in disputes with heretics.

Anthony died in 356, but even hundreds of years later he was not forgotten. A medical band of people adopted his name: The Order of Hospitallers of Saint Anthony was founded (c.1100, in La Motte). It became a pilgrimage centre for those suffering from ergotism (called St Anthony's Fire - a serious form of fungi poisoning).

Anthony was a tremendously popular saint throughout the Middle Ages. By then he was seen as the patriarch of monks, and a healer of both men and animals. Anthony even gave us the word 'tantony', a diminutive applied to the smallest pig in a litter, and to the smallest bell in a peal of bells.

The early church father, Athanasius, wrote The Life of Anthony. This moving biography helped to convert the great Augustine.

The Silent Gift

The gift of God came silently, with surreptitious grace,
To a dark, concealed, stable block in an unfamiliar place.
No ceremonial pomp was there, no fanfare in the street,
When the sacred gift from God was given - and creation made complete.

To no rich men were tidings given, but to shepherds in the fields,
The angel-song, so clear for them, was from other men concealed.
The nobles of the neighbourhood saw nothing of a star;
The heavenly sign of divine love came to Wise Men from afar!

When the Son of God came down from heaven to give his life for all,
A rough-hewn cross of wood was his outside Jerusalem's wall.
The greatest gift that ever was, that freed us all from blame,
Was thus wrapped up in pain and blood and ignominious shame.

So, how shall we, this Christmas time our varied gifts present?
How shall we be mindful, then of what they represent?
No matter what we buy, or give or what we can afford,
However well we wrap them up, we can't out-give the Lord.

Nigel Beeton

Thank you so much to all those who were able to support our Coffee Morning, held in November.

Everyone was so generous and over £1000 was raised to help the work of St Mary's Hospice, both at the Hospice and in the community.

We very much appreciate the support from the congregation of St Faith and St Laurence.

Julia Reid

(on behalf of all in Harborne Fundraising Group for St Mary's Hospice)

Christmas down the ages

The earliest evidence we have for a celebration of Christ's birth is when Julius I, Bishop of Rome (337-352), decreed that Christ's nativity was to be observed on December 25. Why then? According to biblical scholars' calculations, based on the gospels and other church writings, April 17, May 29 and September 15 are all more likely dates for the birth of Jesus.

If Mary gave birth in December, why were the sheep still in the fields in the winter months when they should have been taken in to the villages for warmth? The choice of December 25 seems instead to have been tied to the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year.

By 380, AD December 25 was already a significant date for another form of worship. The most widely practised religion in the Roman empire was known as Mithraism, after the god Mithras, who reputedly slayed a sacred bull, probably in a spring fertility ceremony. The birth of Mithras was also marked at the winter solstice, when he is said to have emerged from his birthplace in a cave, witnessed by two shepherds. In 380 Christianity became the established religion in Rome. Christmas - and some of the stories surrounding it - may owe its key date to a merging of Christian and pagan traditions.

The Venerable Bede claimed in about 730 that ancient Britons referred to December and January as Yule, probably derived from a Norse word, "jul", which originally meant festivities. The word Christmas, or rather Cristes Maesse - Christ's mass - replaced Yule in the British Isles some time after the 9th century.

The use of Christmas gradually became standard, and Yule returned only in the 19th century, with the rekindling of the love for ancient traditions.

By the 11th century in France, a star was hung over church altars for an Epiphany play that was incorporated into the mass, and the story of the Magi, of Herod and the Massacre of the Innocents was acted out. In the 12th century, English churches also staged these plays. Another form of theatre, originated with Francis of Assisi, who in 1223 produced a replica of a stable, with a manger, an ox and an ass (although his animals were real, not yet models).

In the 16th century, a growing number of ardent English Protestants began to condemn the secular holiday. In Scotland in 1561 the newly reformed kirk declared all of Christmas a nasty popish invention, and banned the holidays entirely. By the turn of the century in Scotland, carol singing, playing football, making music and dancing were all banned as profane.

The greatest story ever told

Have you ever felt small and powerless in a world containing over 7 billion people? One UK citizen had a unique angle on the world at Christmas two years ago. From the International Space Station, Major Tim Peake orbited the earth 16 times each day. He tweeted, *'Watching the Earth slip into the shadow of night is truly mesmerising.'* We can only imagine! Later he said: *'View of our beautiful planet from space is simply stunning – I'm captivated by it!'* Who wouldn't be!

I can remember that he was forced to leave a message on his parent's answerphone when he found they had 'popped out' at the very moment he called them from space. His dad, Nigel, said, *"It was quite surreal. We'd popped out for about an hour to see our daughter, and came home to an answerphone message, 'Hello, this is your son from the International Space Station'. I can't believe we were out when he called! But I assure you that message is never going to be deleted."*

Yet, if Tim Peake and the others owned an unbelievably powerful John Lewis telescope, like the one sent to the man on the moon in that TV advert, he would see that the world this Christmas is broken as well as beautiful.

UNICEF estimates that 353,000 babies are born around the world every day. Which means 200 miles below the space station today 120 thousand will be born into danger – facing violence, disease, hunger, and the chaos of war and so-called natural disasters. Many will begin their life as refugees without a country or home. Rapid change continues to accentuate the extremes that separate children who in material terms want for almost nothing from those who are deprived of almost everything.

So how can the meaning and message of Christmas be more than a brief distraction for our hurting and divided world? Do our celebrations this Christmas prove only humanity's capacity to retreat into the land of fairy tales? That need not be so. I believe the true significance of Christmas is the only hope our world has – the child in the manger is everything! Jesus is good news for those who least expect it.

Shepherds on a hillside are the first to receive the announcement that God's Messiah has arrived. A host of angels and the shining glory of the Lord mean there's no questioning what they experienced. Luke tells us they hurried fast to Bethlehem to find the child.

It is an obvious thing to say, but there were no shortage of people to whom God could have sent that company of angels. After all, Jerusalem was only a few miles away – there were plenty of people of power and influence in that city who might have been woken up to go and greet the Saviour of the World.

A Lord's prayer to make us think

I cannot say **'our'** if I live only for myself and I cannot say **'Father'** if I do not endeavour each day to act like his child.

I cannot say **'who art in heaven'** if I am laying up no treasure there.

I cannot say **'hallowed be thy name'** if I am not striving for holiness and I cannot say

'Thy kingdom come' if I am not doing all in my power to hasten that wonderful event.

I cannot say **'thy will be done'** if I am disobedient to his word and I cannot say **'on earth as it is in heaven'** if I'll not serve him here and now.

I cannot say **'give us this day our daily bread'** if I am dishonest or am seeking things by subterfuge.

I cannot say **'forgive us our debts'** if I harbour a grudge against anyone.

I cannot say **'lead us not into temptation'** if I deliberately place myself in its path.

I cannot say **'deliver us from evil'** if I don't put on the whole armour of God.

I cannot say **'thine is the kingdom'** if I do not give the King the loyalty due to him from a faithful subject.

I cannot attribute to him **'the power and the glory'** if I am seeking honour only for myself.

And I cannot say **'for ever'** if the horizon of my life is bounded completely by time.

(Author unknown)

Epiphany

Jesus,
may we not hoard,
but freely give
the gold of our hearts,
the myrrh of our grief,
the frankincense of our dreams,
to You

Mary Palmer



FROM THE REGISTERS

Funeral in church

November 24 Roy Warwick

Funeral at Crematorium

December 18 Joyce Stewart

FACTS AND FIGURES

Week Beginning	Communicants	Loose Plate £	Planned Giving £	Gift Aid £
Nov 19	77	46.10	77.51	
Nov 27	66	73.34	394.30	
Dec 3	77	47.19	312.67	5.00
Dec 10	21	88.20	35.00	10.00
Standing Orders			897.50	21.42
Parish Giving			1160.00	290.00

NOT EVERY CHILD BORN IN A STABLE SURVIVES....

But thanks to those who supported Christian Aid many more will.

But God loves to surprise people who least expect to be swept into his plans to change the world. This is the pattern all through the story of the Gospels. The writer Philip Yancy puts it like this: *'As I read the birth stories of Jesus I cannot help but conclude that though the world may be tilted toward the rich and powerful, God is tilted toward the underdog and those who least expect to gain his attention.'*

The sign given to the shepherds was not simply a means of identification, it is a bold statement of God's intent. This was not as Joseph had imagined when he'd promised to take care of Mary and the special child she bore.

'There was no room for them in the inn'. No room for the Lord of Life and Saviour of the World. Yet rather than being a source of gigantic human embarrassment, this was how God chose it. And those who are drawn to Christ will also find themselves titled towards the weak and powerless. This is the true test of our nation's Christian credentials. Jesus is good news for those who least expect it – refugees included!

Jesus is also pure love for those who don't deserve it. It is human to crave to be loved – yet from the cradle on, our main strategy is to make ourselves lovable by whatever means is available to us. For some it's their wit, for others the power of money, or status, good looks, success. For some it's acts of kindness or service, even religious zeal.

There are many ways to make yourself lovable, but however hard we try it can never make us secure in love. It's why relationships come under such extra strain over Christmas. But Jesus introduces the world to love of an altogether different kind. God needs no magic telescope to see the true condition of our hearts and our broken world, so there's no point in trying to keep up appearances. The Christmas story doesn't flatter us – we need a Saviour more than we need anything else. This child in a manger will die on a cruel cross, so that a fountain of the purest love can flow into our lives from the very heart of God. The greatest challenge we face is being vulnerable enough to recognise our need and receive the gift Jesus came to bring.

At the heart of the Christmas story, is an invitation to move beyond hearing to receiving – that's what the Shepherds chose. They had enough of a story-to-tell just seeing the angels and hearing the message. But what had been offered to them was a personal meeting with the Saviour, and so they hurry to Bethlehem without delay.

In our hearts we can stay at a safe distance and marvel at the angel's song or like the Shepherds, we can get closer to Jesus than we ever imagined possible.

Peter Stokes

The Longest Night

*Come, God of compassion,
to be with all
whose loneliness
makes every night
longer than the
one before;*

*come, God of brokenness,
to mend those
whose shattered
lives seem impossible
to put back together;*

*come, God of hungry hearts,
to companion the
people sitting at
one-chair tables
in restaurants overflowing
with parties, and
in apartments with
scarred linoleum floors;*

*come, God of the gentle arms,
to cuddle
all the children
who cry themselves
to sleep;*

*come, God of every moment,
come, God of every person,
that we might be
the people others
need to find
in every moment
of their lives.*

Thom M Shuman

SUN 21 THIRD SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

8.00 am Holy Communion *Genesis 14.17-20;
Revelation 19.6-10; John 2.1-11*

10.00 am Family Communion with Baptism
Revelation 19.6-10; John 2.1-11

1.00 pm Churches Together Lunch *Hall*

6.30 pm Evensong *Psalms 33.1-12
Jeremiah 3.21-4.2; Titus 2.1-8, 11-14*

Mon 22 1.45 pm Reflections *143 Balden Road*

Tue 23 2.00 pm William Lench Court Service

Wed 24 10.30 am Call in for Coffee *Committee Room*
11.00 am Holy Communion *Lady Chapel*

2 Samuel 7.4-17; Mark 4.1-20

Thu 25 9.30 am Stay and Play *Hall*
6.30 pm Choir Practice *Church*

SUN 28 PRESENTATION OF CHRIST

8.00 am Holy Communion *Malachi 3.1-5;
Hebrews 2.14-end; Luke 2.22-40*

10.00 am Family Communion
Readings as at 8 am

6.30 pm Candlemas Service

Mon 29 1.45 pm Reflections *143 Balden Road*

Wed 31 10.30 am Call in for Coffee *Committee Room*
11.00 am Holy Communion *Lady Chapel*

2 Samuel 24.2, 9-17; Mark 6.1-6a

This is the worst disease

(These words are attributed to Mother Teresa)

I have come more and more to realise that being unwanted is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience. Nowadays we have found medicine for leprosy, and lepers can be cured. There's medicine for tuberculosis and consumption can be cured. but for the unwanted, except there are willing hands to serve, and there is a loving heart to love, I don't think this terrible disease can be cured.

PROGRAMME FOR JANUARY

Wed 3	10.30 am	Call in for Coffee	Committee Room
	11.00 am	Holy Communion <i>1 John 2.29-3.6; John 1.29-34</i>	Lady Chapel
Thu 4	9.30 am	Stay and Play	Hall
	7.30 pm	Service with no name	Church
SUN 7	EPIPHANY		
	8.00 am	Holy Communion <i>Isaiah 60.1-6; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12</i>	
	10.00 am	Family Communion <i>Readings as at 8am</i>	
	6.30 pm	Evensong <i>Psalm 98</i> <i>Isaiah 60.1-9; John 2.1-11</i>	
Mon 8	1.45 pm	Reflections	143 Balden Road
Wed 10	10.30 am	Call in for Coffee	Committee Room
	11.00 am	Holy Communion <i>1 Samuel 3.1-10, 19-20; Mark 1.29-39</i>	Lady Chapel
Thu 11	9.30 am	Stay and Play	Hall
	6.30 pm	Choir Practice	Church
SUN 14	SECOND SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY		
	8.00 am	Holy Communion <i>1 Samuel 3.1-10; Revelation 5.1-10; John 1.43-end</i>	
	10.00 am	Morning Praise	
	6.30 pm	Sung Eucharist <i>Readings as at 8 am</i>	
Mon 15	1.45 pm	Reflections	143 Balden Road
Tue 16	10.30 am	Queen Mother Gardens Service	
Wed 17	10.30 am	Call in for Coffee	Committee Room
	11.00 am	Holy Communion <i>1 Samuel 17.32-33,37,40-51; Mark 3.1-6</i>	Lady Chapel
Thu 18	9.30 am	Stay and Play	Hall
	6.30 pm	Choir Practice	Church

Burnt porridge

You think you'd *like* to see an angel, do you? No. Not something to like.

The very fag end of a long, knacker day with the sheep. We were boiling up a bit of gruel on the fire. To this day when I smell gruel burning I feel ... it takes me there. Burned porridge, and, — look, I'm not one of your religious types. I'm trying hard to keep this clean, not use bad words.

This thing was there, and yes, we were all s — we were all — This thing was there. Bigger than a house. Burning light. A lot of wings, claws, legs, a terrifying face. Then something like a human shape, wavering like looking at fire. That's not why I nearly p—d myself. Not the claws, not the face. It was a sense — look, I don't do touchy-feely, woman's stuff? OK? Don't do it. But I just wanted to hide. Wanted the ground to swallow me. Found myself thinking of things I'd decided to forget.

And then it spoke. It told us not to be afraid. It was quite clear this was an order. You ever tried to stop being afraid because something terrifying gave you an order? I knew I couldn't — and it made me even more afraid. And the thing spoke of the Messiah — and we all know what the day of the Messiah is like, don't we? Fine for you holy bods, sure. People like me? Darkness, that's what. Threat.

And then the thing told us to go to the village and find the Messiah. Look, it was like the burned porridge. It was so flaming ordinary. Not a Messiah like what I expected. Not darkness. A baby, wrapped up just as all little 'uns are — and lying where busy mothers put them, in the work room, safe in the manger during the day while the beasts are out. It was so — look you don't expect great masses of flame and when you get them, you don't expect a message about a baby all safely wrapped up. You just don't.

And you don't expect one blooming great mass of fire to turn into countless masses of fire, none of them any smaller, all singing in complex harmonies. I like a song — I'm one they always call on to sing at weddings and the like — you may well think us a rough lot, but we have our songs. And I ain't never heard the like of this. I can't tell you what I'd give to take a part in a song like that. A good deal more than I possess — that's what.

Then an empty hill — well, it seemed empty. Just us, the sheep and the burned out saucepan.

Rosemary Hannah