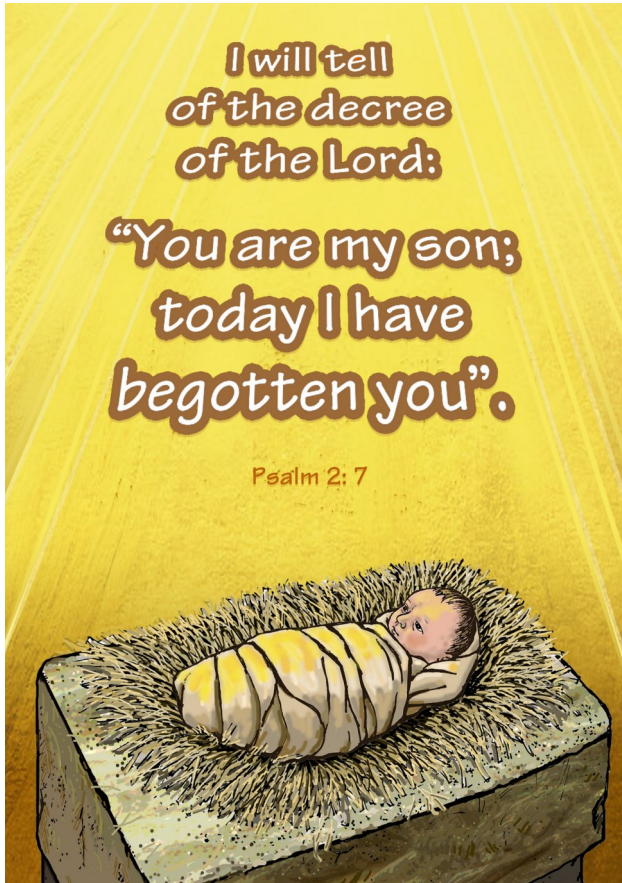


The Mustard Seed

The Parish magazine of the church of St James, Brownhills

A Family Following Jesus



www.stjameschurchbrownhills.co.uk

December 2024

*Called by name & empowered by the Holy Spirit to share
God's love with words and actions*



Christmas decorations

Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria is often credited for making Christmas trees fashionable in Britain but the tradition of decorations and of bringing greenery into our houses and places of worship is far older than that. There are records of decorations for Saturnalia in ancient descriptions from the 5th century BC. Saturnalia fell in mid-

December, around the time of the solstice, which is of course when Christmas falls. Decorating trees is also an ancient Celtic custom. A tree would be decorated at the winter solstice as a symbol of life and the Scandinavians did so to celebrate Yule, also a mid-winter festival.

Celtic tree dressing was not solely associated with the solstice, Piny the Elder describes a festival on the 6th day of the moon which involved sacred oak trees. Ash, apple, hazel alder, elder all have particular importance, with oak, ash and thorn the three primary 'magical' trees, employed by Puck, in Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pooks Hill* to transport the children back through time. Yew features in many traditions and beliefs, as a symbol of both death and life and yew boughs, along with holly were brought indoors to decorate homes and churches for Christmas, probably because of their evergreen foliage and red berries.

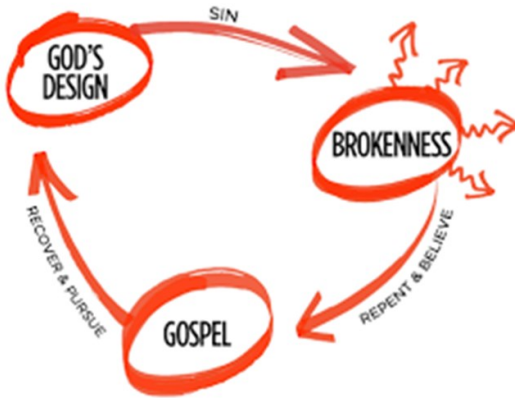
Decorating churches and homes for Christmas has been part of the church calendar for many centuries with almost all surviving church records from the late Middle Ages including entries for purchasing holly and ivy. The Christmas carol *Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly* dates from 16th century Wales. It was Prince Albert who popularised the use of spruce trees however, not a British tree species and imported from his native Coburg in Germany. Periodicals such as the *Illustrated London News* began to describe the royal Christmas tree each year and the custom took off amongst the public. Wreaths hung on the door also became popular during Victorian times although, like decorations and the use of greenery, wreaths were not new, having been presented in Ancient Rome as a reward for military success and excellence. Advent wreaths may have originated amongst Lutherans in 16th century Germany.

Kissing boughs are an old tradition now lost, but which may have led to the custom of kissing beneath the mistletoe. Kissing boughs consisted of a hoop of pliable sticks, probably hazel or willow, made into a sphere on which decorative greenery could be fixed. These would be hung on walls or in doorways to welcome people into the building and could be quite large. Popular in Tudor times, they became more elaborate in Georgian times and included apples, oranges and coloured paper or baubles. Gentlemen could pluck a berry and then kiss a lady on the cheek until the berries ran out and the kissing stopped!

Most of our churchyards and cemeteries contain a ready supply of the greenery traditionally used for decoration; holly, ivy, yew and sometimes mistletoe too. A small contribution towards more sustainable ways could be to increase use of these natural 'decorations' and reduce the need for imported flowers or artificial baubles and lights. You will be following in the footsteps of many generations celebrating both Christmas and the solstice with the hope in a dark season that both bring.

Harriet Carty

Connecting People to Jesus



During November we started reflecting on how we can grow our personal sharing of Jesus (evangelism) and we'll carry that on in January. What we can do during December though is apply what we've been learning so far by firstly praying for our 5 people who are on our hearts to come to know Jesus. Second, we can be practicing growing our personal evangelism whenever the Lord gives us the opportunity. With that task in mind, something we must acknowledge is our need to find new

ways to relate to people and their situations. We must better understand what they're struggling with and the questions they're asking, and use that to point them to Jesus. People are more open to people who can relate to them and understand them.

According to Daniel Strange in his book, 'Making Faith Magnetic', every person you encounter is trying to find the answers to **5 deep, universal questions that they might not even know they're asking**. If you learn to observe and listen for these 5 questions (or "magnetic points") in your daily life, it can open up specific opportunities for you to connect people to Jesus. These 5 magnetic points (or questions people are asking) are: -

"Is there a way to CONNECT?"

"Is there a way to LIVE?"

"Is there a way OUT?"

"Is there a way to CONTROL?"

"Is there a way BEYOND?"

Let's take a closer look at each of these 5 Magnetic Points and how we can practically use each point to spread the gospel and tell people about your faith in Jesus.

1. Is there a way to connect? At a deep level, people know they are meant for close community and for intimate relationships with other people. Yet loneliness is at epidemic levels. Most people don't even know their neighbours' names. From single moms to widowers to fresh-out-of-college-new-job-20-somethings, everyone around you is looking for a connection. You see people searching for connectedness in political rallies, ancestry tracing, dating apps, music festivals, pride marches, social media groups, and more. But all these solutions will eventually fall short. They do not satisfy this deep longing to be connected to something real and true and eternal. And so, people keep searching, trying to scratch this itch: is there a way to connect?

The solution: Jesus is the True Vine and His followers are the branches. This means that we are able to flourish in His presence and power. On the other hand, anyone not connected to

Jesus is cut off, a dead stick. So, in our search to connect, neither something nor someone will give us the meaningful, fulfilling relationship we're looking for, apart from Jesus. He alone can scratch this itch for connection.

Whenever you notice yourself or someone else searching for a way to connect, use this opportunity to show them that Jesus wants a connection with them!

How to get the conversation started: -

“When have you felt connected to something bigger than yourself?”

“Do you feel valued and known by that thing/person you are connected to?”

“Maybe our desire to connect points us to a relational God.”

2. Is there a way to live? When we move to a new town or get a new job or start a new school or make a new friend, we must navigate new norms and new rules. We might call it the “culture” of a place or a people. Most of these things are unspoken, making them difficult to figure out. And while we will all navigate those landmines in unique ways, none of us can avoid them. At almost every stage of our lives, we will be wondering, “is there a way to live?”

The western world of this particular time in history seems obsessed with mantras like “you do you” and “live your truth.” We're all desperate for a good life. And we're all trying to find our own path to that good life. But, along the way, we'd love to make sure others are choosing a path like ours.

It's hard to imagine that we will all ever agree on what the rules and laws of the land should be. But what if there is a standard of living that is better than anything that can be legislated or demanded by a teacher? As followers of Jesus, we know that our desire to find a way to live will only be satisfied by the God who created the universe, gave it natural laws, and made you and me too.

The solution: Jesus not only leads us in the WAY to live, He is the WAY to live. He says “follow me” and He leads us through a broken world, through despair, even through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4) to the Father, to heaven, and to eternal life.

Jesus' claim to be the WAY to live was exclusive, but his invitation is radically inclusive. He said things like, WHOEVER believes in me will have eternal life. (John 3:36) And ALL who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Acts 9:14) So, the invitation is wide open; anyone and everyone can come to God – they just have to come through Jesus, accepting His WAY and His TRUTH, and His abundant LIFE. ALL are welcome through Him.

Keep an eye out for ways that you or others in your life are seeking a way to live and use this opportunity to point them to the one true way, Jesus!

How to get the conversation started: -

“Are you a rule keeper or a rule breaker?”

“How have your norms and rules been informed by your upbringing?”

“Do you think there are ‘universal’ norms? What are those?”

“Do you follow any particular celebrity's or influencer's lifestyle?”

3. Is there a way out? While some of us are more claustrophobic than others, you know

that feeling. You're in a confined space. You feel stuck. You're desperate to find a way out. Sometimes life feels like that. You feel trapped by a boring job or the expectations of society or a relationship that you can't walk away from. Whatever it is, something has you itching for deliverance. And whatever that something is will determine how you look for a way out: -

If your problem is ignorance, then deliverance comes through education.

If your problem is a virus, then deliverance comes through science.

If your problem is identity, then deliverance comes through the right group.

If your problem is loneliness, then deliverance comes through a partner.

The solution: As followers of Jesus, we know that the ultimate problem isn't "out there" but right here, in each of our hearts. The ultimate problem is that we're trapped by our slavery to self, our slavery to sin. The brokenness of our lives, and the wars raging in the world around us are a result of our sin and its consequence- separation from God. At the most basic level of our lives, we're all sinners. But Jesus says, "I AM the resurrection and the life." (John 11:25) Not long after this miracle, Jesus went to the cross. He died the ultimate death to overcome the ultimate problem. Neither Lazarus, nor you, nor your friend looking for a way out needs to be trapped by sin any longer. Jesus is the only way out.

How to get the conversation started: -

"If death is everyone's destiny, why are we so afraid of it?"

"Where do you feel stuck?"

"If you could change something about your life, what would it be and why?"

4. Is there a way to control? As humans, we naturally love to try and control every area of our lives. Financial planning, holiday planning, party planning, family planning, etc. You name your goal, and there are probably dozens of books, podcasts, blogs, influencers, and apps to help you control your destiny. We want to be in control, and so we have tried to take over as gods of our own lives. But as followers of Jesus, we know that while God gave us the responsibility to steward creation (Genesis 2:15)- care for it, shape it, work with it, make a home in it- this world does not ultimately belong to us. God is the owner, and that means He is sovereign and in control of both the world and our individual lives.

The solution: As the Good Shepherd, Jesus knows us, guides us, and satisfies us. It is remarkable that Jesus knows each of us intimately- every sheep has a name! He made us uniquely and He delights in each of us. We can trust that Jesus guides us faithfully- He has shown us the way. He navigated the temptations and struggles of life as a man, and we can follow Him knowing that He goes ahead of us. And Jesus satisfies us abundantly- a good shepherd leads his sheep to green pastures and quiet waters. We can let go of fear and worry and control because He supplies what we need.

How to get the conversation started: -

"Who is in control when a 3-year-old is in the room?"

"What are the easiest things for you to control?"

"How do you manage this specific area of your life?" (parenting, schedule, diet, etc)

5. Is there a way beyond?

One of the biggest questions of all time is, “what happens after we die?”. Death is the end for 100% of us, yet we’re surprised by it, and we live in fear of it. And so, we look for a way beyond. For followers of Christ, that way is obvious. The entire narrative of Scripture points beyond this life to a future hope and eternity in the presence of God. But if the people in your life have rejected Christianity, what are they finding when they look for a way beyond? It may seem like modern society is disenchanted with the supernatural, but just a glance through the most-watched movies and tv shows might point to something different. Cosmic drama is a booming industry. Minimalism as a spiritual alternative is very cool. Ask any athlete what their lucky charm is that they would never take to the field or court without. We want to believe that the universe is bigger than just what we can see and touch. But we’re utterly in the dark without some sort of light.

The solution: With Jesus, we aren’t left guessing as to the way beyond. There is a way beyond, and Jesus came to reveal it- to light up the path for all people- and He can do so because He comes from a world beyond. He came down and lived for a while among us. And while He was here He revealed God to us. He showed us the way beyond.

His light brings life! The ancients in the apostle John’s day believed that air, water, food, and light were all necessary to sustain life. Well, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is all four of these things! He gives the “Breath of Life” in John 3 (John 3:8; 20:22). He is the “Water of Life” in John 4 (John 4:10, 13-14). He is the “Bread of Life” in John 6 (John 6:35). And here in John 1:5, He is the “Light of Life”. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:5)

Even a tiny flame will dispel the darkness. In the same way, the truth always wins out in the end, and Jesus is that truth. He overcomes the darkness of deceit. He conquers the lies of men and demons. Jesus shows us the way beyond this life to our eternal home. He has gone ahead to prepare a place for each of us (John 14:2), and He lights your path the whole way there. And He wants you to show the people in your life this path.

How to get the conversation started: -

“What if the universe isn’t impersonal? What if there is a Creator?”

“Which parts of life feel like you’re living in the dark?”

“What do you say to someone who has just lost a loved one?”

During these Advent and Christmas seasons, I pray that all of this will provide you with much food for thought, and will bring you to your knees (actually or metaphorically speaking) to rely on Jesus and the in-filling of His Holy Spirit to enable you to share the light of His glorious gospel with others.

With love and many blessings for this festive season,

Rev’d Gayle

Sol Invictus, Emperors and how Christmas began

It was 1,750 years ago, on 25th December 274, that the Roman Emperor Aurelian founded and launched the cult of Sol Invictus as an official religion. He erected a temple and declared 25th December a national holiday, to be known as the Feast of the Unconquered Sun. In 336, after the conversion of the emperor Constantine, the Church in Rome began to celebrate Christmas on 25th December.

Aurelian, who was born in Moesia – the south-eastern Balkans – rose from modest beginnings to become a strong and successful Emperor at one of the most difficult times in Roman history. He defeated many attempts to destroy the empire from without and within, notably attempts by the Gallic and Palmyrene Empires, and improved the lot of the common people.

His idea in promoting Sol Invictus as the main divinity of the Empire was to try to give everyone a god to believe in without betraying their own gods. However, when Constantine the Great, who was born during Aurelian's reign, became Emperor in 306 and converted to Christianity, it was the beginning of the end for Sol Invictus – and the start of the dominance of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

The date of 25th December was taken over and celebrated as the birthday of Jesus – and has been ever since, though scholars agree that this is an impossible date because flocks of sheep would not have been out in the fields in the dead of winter, and therefore shepherds would not have been out either. Other dates have been suggested, of which perhaps the most convincing is September 11.

It is a happy irony that in English, Christmas can be described accurately as the Feast of the Unconquered Son.

On why Carol Services are so dangerous

The Rectory

St James the Least

My dear Nephew Darren

So, you are excited about being invited to plan your first Carol Service. The dangers involved are only slightly less than being invited to judge the best cake made by the Ladies' Group. You seem to have no idea of the lifelong offence you will inevitably cause. In decades to come when you will either be a seasoned old clergyman – or more likely a double glazing salesman – you will be remembered as “the Curate who offended Mrs Smith.”

First, you have to decide which groups are going to be represented to give the readings. If the Brownies were asked last year, then it has to be the Cubs this time. But don't forget that every third year, the Boys' Brigade must be asked, or they will take their revenge and get their flag tangled in the nave chandelier come Remembrance Sunday. If someone represents the choir, then over a four year period, all four voice parts must be called on – and if the organist isn't asked on the fifth year, then all hymns subsequently will be played at double speed and with one verse missing. Should one person have been invited to read for two successive years, then their annual appearance thereafter will be taken as an inalienable right for the rest of their lifetime – and probably longer than that. To drop them may well invoke legal proceedings,

Then there is the batting order to be considered. Someone from the church council will take it as a deliberate slight if they are placed lower in the order than a representative of the Men's Fellowship and no self-respecting bell ringer would voluntarily follow a brass cleaner.

If you do not specify where they should read from and how the readings should end, then a form of ecclesiastical inflation will happen. If the first reader speaks from the chancel step, the next one will go to the lectern; after the sanctuary and pulpit have been utilised, the final reader will probably ask you to move so he can take your place. The variations on "Here endeth", "This is the Word of the Lord", and "Thanks be to God", are endless and will increase in length as the Service progresses. The final reader will probably end with a lengthy exegesis on what he thinks the passage means, correcting whatever you said in your sermon.

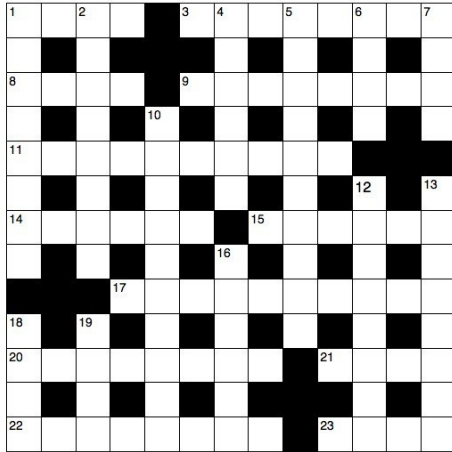
I once made the mistake of not telling all readers which Bible translation to use. One, an Old Testament expert, therefore decided to read in Hebrew. Not to be outdone, another read her Gospel passage in Greek – apologising beforehand that it may not be a perfect rendering, as she was spontaneously translating it from the English. And some say Christians are not competitive.

You have two alternatives: either repeat last year's Service without any alteration, saying that it could not be improved, or design your own – and then take Christmas off.

Your loving uncle,

Eustace

December



Crossword

Across

- 1 'The blind receive sight, the — walk' (Luke 7:22) (4)
- 3 Got (Philippians 3:12) (8)
- 8 Leave out (Jeremiah 26:2) (4)
- 9 Castigated for using dishonest scales (Hosea 12:7) (8)
- 11 Weighty (1 John 5:3) (10)
- 14 'Now the serpent was more — than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made' (Genesis 3:1) (6)
- 15 'Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot — God' (Romans 8:8) (6)
- 17 Because Israel lacked one of these, tools had to be sharpened by the Philistines (1 Samuel 13:19) (10)
- 20 In his vision of the two eagles and the vine, this is how Ezekiel described the latter (Ezekiel 17:8) (8)
- 21 Rite (anag.) (4)
- 22 Nine gigs (anag.) (8)
- 23 'The eye cannot say to the — , "I don't need you"' (1 Corinthians 12:21) (4)

Down

- 1 'Flee for your lives! Don't — — , and don't stop anywhere in the plain!' (Genesis 19:17) (4,4)
- 2 Principal thoroughfare (Numbers 20:19) (4,4)
- 4 'The tax collector... beat his — and said, "God have mercy on me, a sinner"' (Luke 18:13) (6)
- 5 'The zeal of the Lord Almighty will — this' (2 Kings 19:31) (10)
- 6 'The day of the Lord is — for all nations' (Obadiah 15) (4)
- 7 Specified day (Acts 21:26) (4)
- 10 Deadly epidemic (Deuteronomy 32:24) (10)
- 12 Roman Catholic church which has special ceremonial rights (8)
- 13 Tied up (2 Kings 7:10) (8)
- 16 In his speech to the Sanhedrin, Stephen described Moses as 'powerful in speech and — ' (Acts 7:22) (6)
- 18 'Although he did not remove the high places, — heart was fully committed to the Lord all his life' (1 Kings 15:14) (4)
- 19 Tribe (Deuteronomy 29:18) (4)

No Room? On the Contrary

All over the world, doors are being slammed shut this Christmas. As the wars in the Middle East, in Ukraine and in Sudan rage on, millions are losing their homes and places of safety. Elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers and would-be immigrants are on the road, seeking refuge anywhere they can find it.

Meanwhile, in recent years vast numbers of Christians have been forced to flee from their ancient homelands in Syria and Iraq. They mirror the Holy Family's escape into Egypt. Every time yet another infant dies violently, it is a reminder of the first century massacre of babies in the Bethlehem region.

So perhaps this year, one carol will be sung with particular poignancy. It retells the message of angels, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favour rests" and continues:

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife,
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel strain have rolled,
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love song which they bring:
O hush the noise, you men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.*

The angels' goodwill message will persist despite our clamour, for it proclaims God's all-embracing and eternal welcome. Whatever is happening on earth, Heaven's doors are ever open: it is home for everyone. The final biblical vision is of an all-encompassing city: "On no day will its gates ever be shut... the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it."

Jesus, for whom there had been no room at the inn, taught that God's kingdom is home for every race: "I say to you that many will come from the East and the West, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." He reassured those anxious about the future: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms..."

No room in heaven? Don't you believe it!

The man who married Mary

The traditional Nativity scene on our Christmas cards has Mary with the Holy Babe. Around her are the shepherds and Magi. We may also see stable animals, angels and a star! While Joseph is often included, his presence seems to be of minor importance.

After all, we praise God for Jesus with our familiar Christmas carols, mentioning angels, shepherds, Wise Men and Mary but the name of Joseph is absent! Why is Joseph given a low profile? For he is a man to be remembered. Joseph was a resident of Nazareth. He worked as a carpenter and his skills would have included making furniture, repairing buildings, and crafting agricultural tools. Although Joseph had an honourable profession, he would not have been a man of great wealth.

The gospel writers Matthew and Luke give Joseph a few brief mentions. After the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary go to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate the Baby to God. Afterwards, they flee into Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod and much later return to Nazareth. 12 years later, Mary and Joseph go with Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Here they lose Jesus, only to find Him in the Temple talking with religious leaders!

Apart from these verses, the New Testament is silent about the rest of Joseph's life. However, we do know that Joseph was father to other children by Mary. His four sons are named, and they had at least two daughters. (See Matthew 13:55)

And we also know that Joseph was someone who quietly and humbly took on the awesome role in caring for the early life of the Son of God. Joseph would have taught Jesus many things – not just the skills of a labourer, but the lore of the countryside which was evident in our Lord's teaching. Jesus grew up within a loving family and described God as 'Father', knowing also the good fatherly qualities of Joseph. In the Christmas story, Joseph is placed into a situation that brought him misunderstanding and suspicion. But Joseph remained faithful in the knowledge that as long as God had spoken, the opinion of others mattered little. Before Jesus began His ministry, it is believed that Joseph died. It is likely Jesus took on many of His father's responsibilities before He left home.

In the eyes of the world, Joseph was a nobody. He was not a man of valour, fame, and fortune. But he was the one who had parental responsibility for the greatest person who has ever lived!

It is sad that we often equate ordinariness with ineffectiveness. Down the ages, God has used many ordinary people to accomplish great things. God continues to use ordinary people. Like Joseph, we need to know that doing God's will is the most important thing in life. May we, this Christmas, respond to God's call to us and please Him in all that we do.

Events Diary

Sunday 1st December – Church Family Christmas Meal

Wednesday 4th December - Carol Singing and Fish & Chips at Jack ‘Jigger’ Taylor pub 7.30pm

Saturday 7th December – Christingle Making in Church Hall
10am

Saturday 7th December – Christmas Fayre in Church from 12 noon

Sunday 8th December – Christingle Service at 4.15pm

Friday 13th December – Family Film Night showing *Muppets Christmas Carol*

Sunday 15th December – Carols by Candlelight at 6.15pm

Wednesday 18th December – Blue Christmas at 7.30pm

Thursday 19th December – Carol Singing at the Homestead at 11am

Tuesday 24th December – All Age Nativity at 3.00pm

Tuesday 24th December – Holy Communion at 11.30pm

Wednesday 25th December—8am and 10am Holy Communion

Tuesday 31st December – New Year’s Eve Party at 7.30pm

*The hinge of history is on the door of a
Bethlehem stable. - Ralph Sockman*

Why the world was ready for Christmas

Ever wonder why Jesus was born when He was? The Bible tells us that “when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son...” The Jewish people had been waiting for their Messiah for centuries. Why did God send Him precisely when He did?

Many biblical scholars believe that the ‘time had fully come’ for Jesus because of the politics of the time. The Roman Empire’s sheer size and dominance had achieved something unique in world history: the opportunity for travel from Bethlehem to Berwick on Tweed without ever crossing into ‘enemy territory’ or needing a ‘passport’.

For the first time ever, it was possible for ‘common’ people to travel wide and far, and quickly spread news and ideas. And all you needed were two languages - Greek to the east of Rome, and Latin to the west and north. You could set sail from Joppa (Tel Aviv) and head for any port on the Med. And the Roman roads ran straight and true throughout the empire.

So, the Roman Empire achieved something it never intended: it helped spread news of Christianity far and wide for 400 years. After that, the Empire crumbled, and the borders shut down. Not until the 19th century would people again roam so freely. The time for Jesus to be born, and for news of Him to be able to travel, had indeed ‘fully come’.

Long-awaited Immanuel

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

The plan of salvation is intimately connected to the Old Testament, and was the fulfilment of prophecies made long ago. God was sending His Son into the world that we might be saved. God is with us – this astonishing, mind-blowing truth underpinned Joseph’s straight-forward trust in Him. Today as you get on with your life, pray that the wonder of knowing that God is with you will never be far from your awareness.

Prayer for December 2024

Father, the days are short; darkness deepens in December and this year it seems to reflect the darkness in so many parts of the world. We think especially of the land You came to, all those years ago, and other nearby lands where so many are suffering.

Father, thank you that Jesus came into the world as Your Light; that He shines today as brightly and powerfully as He did then, and will do forever.

Help us to open our hearts and minds to allow His light to fill us with the assurance that, no matter what is going on, we are safe in Him.

Thank you that, in Jesus, You have conquered death and darkness; that one day, everyone will bow before Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, whose Kingdom shall never end. Help us, in thankfulness and love, to share Your Christmas Light and Hope and Joy. Hallelujah! In Jesus' name. Amen.

By Daphne Kitching



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THE PARISH OF BROWNHILLS WITH OGLEYS HAY

Called by name & empowered by the Holy Spirit to share
God's love with words and actions

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Lay Ministers:

Pete Biggs 01922 692163

Liz Corbett 01543 370162

Graham Sutherland (Reader with Permission to Officiate) 01543 671020

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