

## **Parish of Stockport and Brinnington**

**St Mary Stockport – St Thomas Stockport – St Luke Brinnington**  
**STOCKPORT PARISH CHURCH**



### **Welcome to our parish news-sheet for December 2020.**

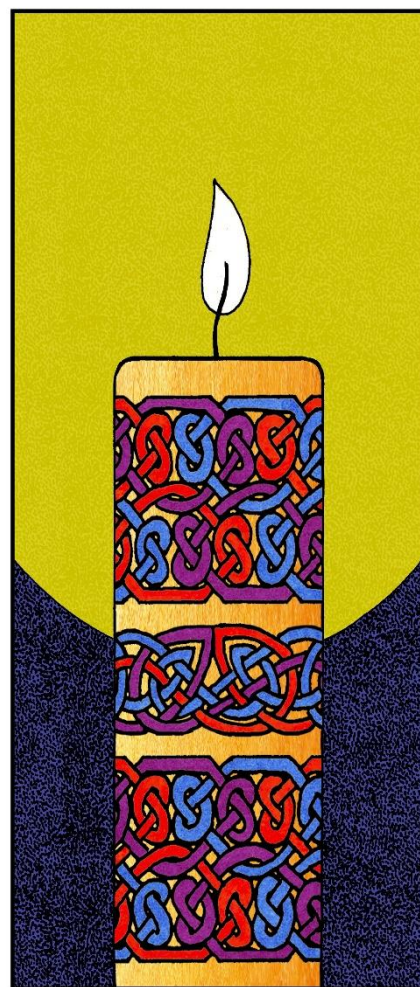
What is your Christmas wish this year?

For many it will probably be to meet family and friends, and it may just be that in a new “Christmas bubble” some of you will be able to do just that over the “five days” of Christmas (23<sup>rd</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> Dec).

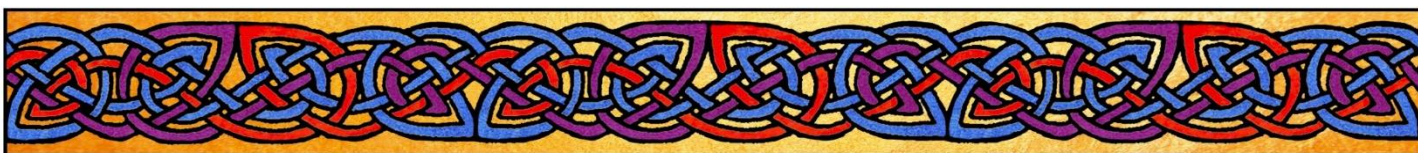
Or it may be that you would just like to attend a good old fashioned carol service, the kind when we are able to sing together all those glorious familiar hymns and carols. Many of us I am sure will miss the opportunity to attend in person one (or even several) of the many carol services/concerts that would normally be taking over most the month of December. It is certainly very strange this year having nothing in the diary, although we will be doing what we can, when we can, and will remain visible on the screen of your laptop, smart-phone or i-pad. If you possible can, please do keep an eye on our Facebook pages and web-sites - where we will keep you updated as to our plans – and don’t forget “Stockport Parish Pew Tube”.

We can be assured that whatever restrictions are lifted (or implemented depending where we are), we will celebrate the Christmas story in some way or another, although much of that may be “on-line”. For those charities, schools and other organisations unable to join us this Advent/Christmas we wish you well and look forward to your return to us next year.

Whatever you are doing (or hope to do) over the next few weeks, the Ministry Team, Churchwardens and members of the Parochial Church Council wish you all a Happy Christmas and a Blessed New Year.



SMH





## Christmas Angels



This Christmas we will be leaving small handmade knitted, crocheted and felt angels by our church buildings and distributing them here and there around Stockport.

The angels will be available for anybody to take away, as a gift to the people of Stockport from our parish.

We are delighted to have had an overwhelming response to our request for assistance. Angels have already been donated from as far away as Crewe and we are aware some are even being made in Devon. If you are still in production, completed angels are required by 6<sup>th</sup> December please (preferably by dropping them off at St. Mary's during our opening times) and will start to be distributed around the 13<sup>th</sup> December in plenty of time for Christmas.



If you need any further information on our Christmas angels project then please call Marie: **07780 964365**

**Thank you to everyone who has taken part – adding a little “comfort and joy” this Christmas.**

## Why not make an Advent wreath this December.

The Advent wreath (or Advent crown) symbolizes the passage of the four weeks of Advent in the liturgical calendar of the Western church. Traditionally, it is an evergreen wreath with four candles, sometimes with a fifth, white candle in the centre.

Beginning with the First Sunday of Advent (29<sup>th</sup> November) the lighting of a candle can be accompanied by a Bible reading, devotional time and prayers. An additional candle is lit on each subsequent Sunday (6<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> December) until, by the last Sunday of Advent, all four candles are lit.

The fifth (Christ) candle, is lit at Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

The custom originated in family settings - as well being used in public worship. Maybe this year, with us spending more time at home it would be nice to make one of our own. Take care if using real candles, you could of course use LED instead – many look so realistic these days.



**Look out on our You-Tube pages for some instructions from Brenda as to how you can make your own Advent wreath.**



## A message from Lynne

Comfort  
& Joy

The 'Comfort and Joy' theme chosen this year for the national Church of England preparations for Advent and Christmas, form part of the words of that well known hymn God Rest ye Merry Gentlemen, where tidings or news of comfort and joy are assured to those who 'rest merry'. What does it mean to 'rest merry' in God? The use of language has moved on from the sixteenth century when that hymn was written, but 'rest' might be better interpreted now as 'remain' and 'merry' as to be 'peaceful'; so the urging this year is for us to remember that now, as ever, the good news is that in Christ's coming we are assured of remaining and resting peacefully within relationship with God. But as the year 2020 draws to a close, that is perhaps a hard concept to grasp. 2020 has been a year of fairly relentless challenge, anxiety and grief. For many of us, this will have been the most difficult year of our lives with Covid, lockdown, furloughing and enforced isolation. What of rest, of peace, what of 'comfort and joy' is to be found in all of that?

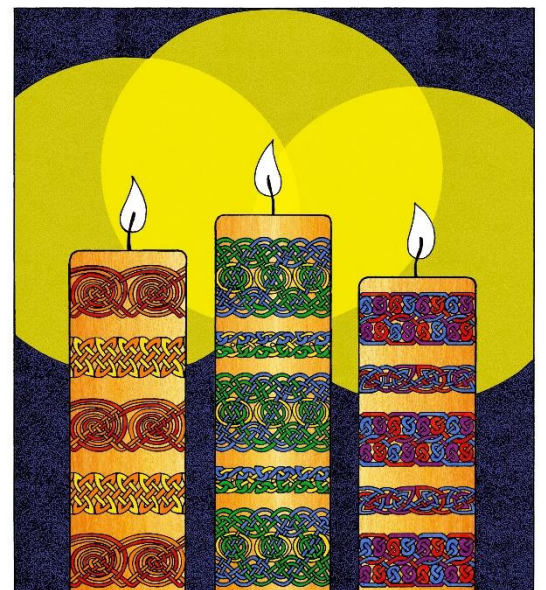
An answer came, certainly in part, to that question in two developments at St Mary's over recent days. Firstly, via an idea from Catriona Smith and taken up with our Curate Marie, to have the folk of Stockport and Brinnington invited to knit little prayer angels that might be displayed and distributed across the parish, shops and businesses over the Advent and Christmas period, with a tag attached reading 'With love and prayers from the Parish of Stockport and Brinnington'. Marie describes this particular source of 'Comfort and Joy' more fully below.

And the second point of real light, came in some filming we have been doing recently in our time of private prayer at St Mary's. We asked members of the congregation and visitors, to say in a sentence or two, what had brought them 'Comfort and Joy' over the past year. And the responses were wonderful... 'I've loved having more time to read', 'I'm blessed by all the technology - though I never thought I'd say that - because it's enabled me to keep in touch with my little grandson over lockdown', 'I've discovered the joy of black and white classic films', 'I'm so grateful for my neighbours taking time to check in with me' and 'I've found joy in seeing my son nursed back from serious illness at Stepping Hill Hospital and he's now home and well'.

At a time when the world was in darkness, God gave light that first Christmas; and in the darkness of the challenges of this year, he continues to shine in our hearts, lives and community. We remain a people of peace because we have Christ's words in John's Gospel chapter 10 vs 28 that he gives us eternal life and no-one can snatch us from his hand. No virus, no circumstance, no time of threat or isolation.

So please do find some points of 'Comfort and Joy' of your own over the coming weeks; be at peace, be a people of peace and 'rest merry'. My love and prayers are with you, and all those you love and pray for, this Advent and Christmas season

Lynne







Jess



For me personally, a real source of comfort and joy over this past year, has been in my joining you. Despite the restrictions, much has happened in that six months, which gives us much to rejoice and give thanks for. One of those things is our work in the schools. Although much of what we've had to do has had to be virtual, we have been able to support some of those families most in need through the regular food contributions, which I saw again this week, brought much joy to those receiving them; as well as through a substantial financial contribution toward a project at Vernon Park school, providing coats, underwear, crockery and cutlery for those who cannot provide these things for themselves. We are also beginning to see the relationships with our school begin to build, which is a real source of hope for me as we look toward what's next for us as a parish.

Another thing that has brought a sense of comfort and joy for many has been the reopening of our church buildings, and it has been a real privilege for me to serve predominantly at St Thomas' these past six months. We are excited for our forthcoming Carol Service, which, although virtual, will reflect the heart of St Thomas' community, particularly through its music, and I'm grateful to Stephen Scott and others for making this possible, as I know it will bring real joy to people in what will otherwise be a different and somewhat unusual celebration of Christmas.

My personal thanks to all of you for your warm welcome and encouragement and my blessings to you all for a happy, healthy and peaceful Christmas.

Jess



## Christmas Gift Drive



**PLEASE help to brighten the festive season for children in need by donating to our Christmas Gift Drive in partnership with Stockport Homes.**

**Stockport Homes will be handing out gifts for children and young people between the ages of 0 – 18 years of age.**

**Gifts may be left at St Mary's – Tuesday/Thursday & Saturday 11.30am-12.30pm**

**Please don't wrap your gift(s) but wrapping paper (separately) would be appreciated.**

**Thank You**







Marie



'Despite an unusual year and challenging year there has been much to thank God for and celebrate. I've found comfort and joy in many small and sometimes surprising things. During the national lockdown at the beginning of the year I enjoyed the extra time at home with my family. Home-schooling was hard but we did have lots of fun as well. As the weather was so nice we got into the habit of taking walks together in the evening through Woodbank Park and down to Pebble Beach and Poise Brook. I discovered some beautiful parts of Stockport that I didn't even know existed! I was so thankful that we have a garden and we spent time together there. I was reminded of the blessing our garden is when I delivered Holiday Club at home packs to some children who live in flats during the Summer holidays. But, it was also a joy to see them and have a brief conversation at a distance, or to wave through the window.

It have also received great comfort and joy at seeing all the wonderful support that people in the community have been offering each other this year – from neighbours cooking and shopping for one another, to the Stockport Spiderman cheering children up and more recently the huge numbers of local food businesses and take-aways who have offered free meals for children during half term. The pandemic has really given us all the opportunity to serve our neighbours and to bless each other in the everyday.

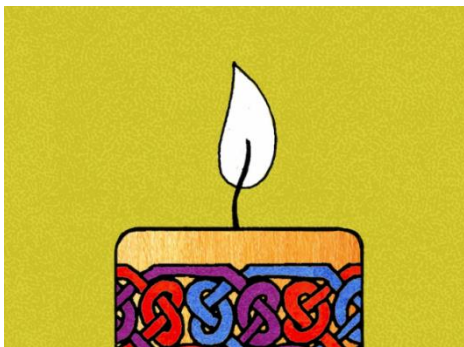
And, we have invited Stockport people to bless one another further this advent with our knitted angel yarn bomb which we are planning for later in the month. We have invited individuals to knit or crochet small angels that we will place around the parish, for others to take away and hang somewhere in their homes, as a sign of love and care and prayers from others. The response so far has been overwhelming and around 60 people have generously offered to make angels. Most people have been only to pleased to help and are glad of a 'project' to occupy themselves during the second lockdown. Please pray that these angels will be a source of comfort and joy to those giving as well as receiving them – and for good weather so they don't get too soggy when we put them out! Many thanks to Catriona for her ideas and leadership in the angel yarn bomb.

Our social group on Monday afternoons at 2pm called 'Together' is also a source of comfort and joy for all who come along via Zoom for a weekly catch up. We have got some interesting speakers lined up for the next few weeks. Please do join us if you are able to, and ask for help if you're stuck with the technology.

I pray that you find comfort and joy in the everyday, and in one another, this Christmas and that our parish can continue to serve and bless our community in 2021. Thanks be to God for the opportunity to be church in unusual and challenging times!

Have a peaceful and blessed Christmas,

Marie







A letter from Margaret

## SHOE BOXES IN COVID 19

At the end of the long Lockdown Teams4U told us they were able to continue sending shoe boxes to Eastern Europe this year. Due to the Covid restrictions leaflets could not be displayed in church so the Sunday congregation were informed and I contacted various friends who usually prepare boxes or fillers. Many had already collected lots of items or had knitted more scarves, hats or teddies during lockdown.

Compass Point where the boxes usually are collected from could not open and be used safely and the boxes had to be 'quarantined' each time they were transferred. As friends usually bring their boxes to my home first, the Teams4U co-ordinator for this area agreed with the Covid restrictions to collect the boxes there.

Boxes filled with gifts for children and family homes, knitted items and donations brought to St Mary's were blessed by Jess. After 'quarantining' the 23 boxes I took them home and later on a wet day 111 boxes and 10 bags of hats, scarves and other items were collected by the Teams4U representative and taken to the collection point in Heywood. As soon as the lockdown in Wales ended the van transferred them to their processing centre near Wrexham.

This was an ecumenical effort, as well as St Mary's the boxes and gifts came from friends at Heaton Moor United church and St Paul's Heaton Moor, Aspinall Methodist, St Nicolas Burnage and St Werburgh's Chorlton.

Many, many thanks to everyone who contributed to this year's T4U appeal.

128 boxes were also collected from Davenport Methodist and St George's. I have since sent 21 more boxes so the total from Stockport was 260 boxes which is excellent in these difficult times. The boxes are now on their journey to Romania, Bosnia and Belarus and I have since heard well over 1800 are now at Wrexham from Greater Manchester and there are still more to go there!

Margaret Forster







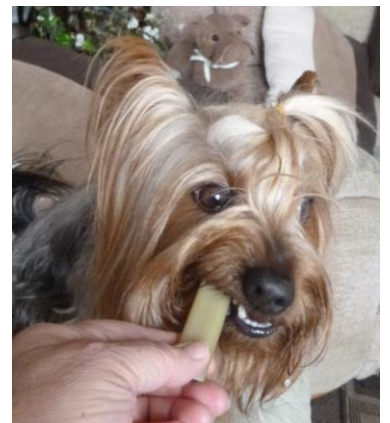
## Roggie Dog

Hello everyone – Roggie here. I hope you are all keeping well and looking forward to Christmas.

I have had to ask Santa for some new jumpers – this is one that I have received early for my photo-shoot. I seem to have put on weight but I don't think that I have been eating too much during lockdown. I had to visit the vet the other day and stand on the scales – why do they always want to weigh me – but at 6.5kg I think that is just about right!



Do you like my new “Doggiebag”? Lovely isn't it – thank you Auntie Margaret. I just fit in it should Mummy wish to carry me – but so far she has said no. Still, you never know when a bag such as this can come in handy. Let's think, I can put my doggie treats in and wait for Mummy to pop one in my mouth and hold it for me! Lovely!



I asked Mummy if we could put the Christmas tree up early this year and I was so delighted when she said yes. We have an “icicle” tree – they are not real icicles of course but they do keep “melting” and falling to the floor. It is next to the front window so people can see it from the road. Mummy has also put 1000 little white lights on to the cherry tree outside in the front garden. We have coloured lights over the top of the window and door too, falling down the ivy. I hope that our lights spread a little joy as people walk past with their doggies. Here I am (photo bottom left) looking through the window waiting for the big switch ON!







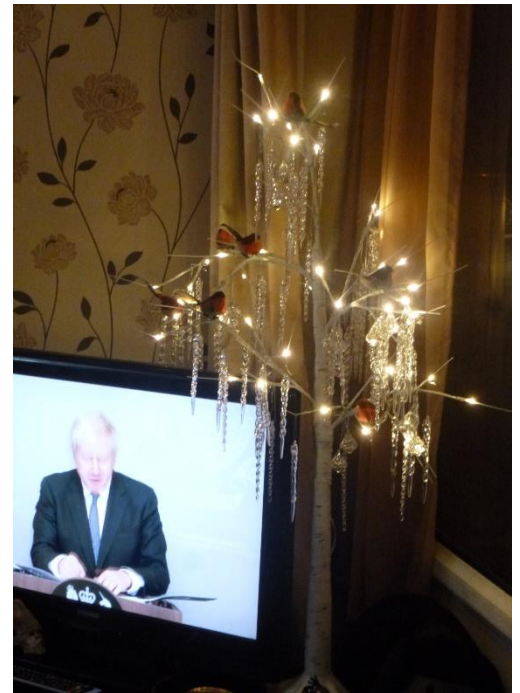
We do of course have a more traditional Christmas tree just for Mummy and I – this one has baubles and all the things I would like to get my paws on, like the little candle lights. I think Santa will be bringing me another couple of jumpers for when we go walkies up the road. Mummy has said something about ordering me a doggie-dryer - but I don't know if she has or not. I'll be happy just to be with Mummy and for all of us to "stay safe" whilst this horrid virus is still around and making so many of you humans poorly.

Whatever the man on the television says about lockdown ending and new restrictions, whatever tier

we will be in, and whatever Christmas "bubbles" are, Mummy and I will be happy to sit this one out and look forward to the New Year and hopefully a light at the end of the tunnel for an early "end" to Covid during 2021.

We both wish you a Happy Christmas and a much improved New Year.

I have a couple of additional pages this month, call it a "Christmas Special". I'm going to tell you about my love of socks and – well you will have to read on...



Love and Best Wishes

Roggie X



Now here is a question for you –

**How many Christmas Carols do you actually know?**

Here is a challenge: why not spend some time learning the words to traditional carols this year? Polls have found that too many of us know the title of a carol and the tune and the opening line or so, but then we get stuck for words (the proper ones at least).





## All in the month of December

It was:



400 years ago, on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1620 that the first landing party from the British ship Mayflower arrived at what would become Plymouth Colony (now Plymouth Massachusetts). They began building houses there two days later. **300 years ago, on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1720 that Charles Edward Stuart, commonly known as 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' was born. Stuart claimant to the British throne and leader of the unsuccessful Jacobite rebellion of 1745-46. Grandson of King James II of England and Ireland (also known as James VII of Scotland).** 250 years ago, on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1770 that Ludwig van Beethoven, German composer and pianist was born. **90 years ago, on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1930 that in his second State of the Union address, US President Herbert Hoover announced a huge public works programme to stimulate the economy and create jobs during the Great Depression.** 80 years ago, on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1940 that Germany dropped thousands of incendiary bombs on London, causing the worst fire damage since the Great Fire of London in 1666. About 200 people were killed. **75 years ago, on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1945 that the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development were formally founded.** 70 years ago, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1950 that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (also known as the UN Refugee Agency) was established. **65 years ago, on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1955 that African American civil rights activist Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, violating the city's racial segregation laws. This incident led to the birth of the modern American civil rights movement.** 60 years ago, on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1960 that the first episode of the television soap opera Coronation Street was broadcast in the UK. **40 years ago, on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1980 that John Lennon, rock musician and peace activist and a member of the Beatles, was shot dead, aged 40, outside his New York City apartment by Mark Chapman, a deranged fan.** 30 years ago, on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1990 that British and French construction workers on the Channel Tunnel broke through the last wall of rock separating the two halves, and Britain and France were linked for the first time in thousands of years. **25 years ago, on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1995 that the Brixton riot took place in south London. Hundreds of youths rioted on the streets following the death of a black man in police custody.** 20 years ago, on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2000 that George W Bush finally claimed the US presidency, 36 days after the election was held, following a legal battle over disputed votes in Florida. **15 years ago, on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2005 that the Civil Partnership Act came into effect in the UK. The first civil partnership under the act was formed in Belfast, that same day. The first in England and Wales were on 21<sup>st</sup> December.** 10 years ago, from 18<sup>th</sup> December 2010 to December 2012 that the Arab Spring took place in North Africa and the Middle East. The Tunisian Revolution spread and became a wave of demonstrations, protests, riots, coups, foreign interventions, and civil wars in North Africa and the Middle East. The leaders and governments of several countries were overthrown and ousted, and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was killed (October 2011).



## Spending at Christmas

Of course, we may not actually spend as much this year - a Covid Christmas could actually help take some financial pressure off us, according to Martin Lewis, the personal finance expert. The Money Saving Expert founder recently pointed out that because of the enormous pressure on people to spend, spend, spend at Christmas, the festive period has become one of the 'biggest causes of debt and misery' in the UK. This year, though, could be different. Most of us will be visiting fewer people, buying fewer presents and having smaller dinners. So, 'it might just take the pressure off people.'







## High Days and Holy Days for the month of December



**1<sup>st</sup> December:**        **Eloi – a patron saint for the euro?**

It's many years since Europe switched over to the Euro (January 2002). So, this is a good time to remember Eloi, bishop of Noyon, who was born in Gaul, and started out as a goldsmith. He entered the service of Bobon, the royal treasurer. He went on to become master of the mint for King Clotaire 1 of France. His reputation was based not only on excellent design, but also on economical use of materials. Not a bad example for the makers of the Euro! Eloi's craftsmanship and friendship with the king made him very wealthy. He gave much of his money to the poor, built a number of churches, ransomed slaves, and founded a convent in Paris and a monastery in Solignac.

**3<sup>rd</sup> December:**        **Francis Xavier – the seasick missionary**

Ignatius Loyala sent his friend and follower Francis Xavier (born 1506) to the Orient as a missionary.

What a missionary!

Imagine David Livingstone, Billy Graham and the Alpha Courses rolled into one.

His mass conversions became legendary – he baptised 10,000 people in one month and in just ten years of work was credited with 700,000 conversions.

Xavier became the most famous Jesuit missionary of all time, working so hard that he had only a few hours' sleep each night. He was known as 'the Apostle of the Indies' and 'the Apostle of Japan'. He began by reforming Goa, which contained numerous Portuguese Catholics, notorious for cruelty to their slaves, open concubinage, and neglect of the poor.

For three years, by example, preaching and writing verses on Christian truths set to popular tunes, Francis did much to offset this betrayal of Christ by bad Christians.

For the next seven years he worked among the Paravas in southern India, in Ceylon, Malacca, the Molucca islands, and the Malay peninsula. He met with immense success among the low-caste, but with almost none among the Brahmins. In 1549 he ventured on to Japan, translated an abridged statement of Christian belief, and made a hundred converts in one year at Kagoshima alone. When he left Japan, the total number of Japanese Christians was about 2,000; within 60 years they were resisting fierce persecution, even to death.

Wherever Xavier sailed, he left after him numerous organised Christian communities. Not bad for a man who suffered seasickness and had trouble in learning foreign languages! Xavier died in 1551, on his way to China. His body was preserved and enshrined for many years. His right arm was detached in 1615 and is still preserved in the church of the Gesu at Rome. He was canonised by Gregory XV in 1622, and declared Patron of the Foreign Missions by Pius XI in 1927.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> December: Birinus – an apostle to the English**

Thousands of our churches are currently involved in various mission initiatives across the UK. If it is tough going at times, we should spare a thought for poor Birinus, a priest from Lombard, who was sent here on his own 14 centuries ago. Pope Honorius I gave him the daunting task of being the apostle to Wessex. It was about 635 that Birinus first sailed across the Channel. He planned to convert all of Wessex, and then press on into the Midlands, where no Christian preacher had ever yet been. But once he began ministry in Wessex, Birinus found the West Saxons so pagan that he decided he better just stay and concentrate on them. So Birinus began his ministry, endlessly travelling around Wessex, and preaching to whomever he encountered. Gradually he became known, and his message began to seep through.

Then a great breakthrough occurred: the King of Wessex, Cynegils, asked Birinus for instruction in the Christian faith. His daughter was going to marry Oswald, the Christian king of Northumbria, and for political reasons Cynegils now wanted to convert. So Birinus taught and baptised Cynegils and his family, and in return they gave him the Romano-British town of Dorchester as his see, and Birinus became the first bishop of Dorchester. It was an excellent strategic move: Dorchester was on a main road and river in the centre of an area of dense Anglo-Saxon settlement. From his new 'headquarters', Birinus spent his last 15 years going on to build many churches around Wessex, and to baptise many people. Towards the end of his life Birinus dedicated a church at Winchester, which later became the ecclesiastical centre of the kingdom. (There is no record of Wessex bishops at Dorchester after 660.) Any lesson in all this? Bloom where God plants you, and be faithful to your calling, however tough things may look at first, and however obscure the place. Birinus' obedience and faith planted Christianity in a key part of Britain, and so helped shape British history for centuries to come.

### **4<sup>th</sup> December: Osmond – an immigrant before Brexit**

Osmond is the saint for you if you regret Brexit, and believe that immigrants can bring good to Britain. Osmond came to England from France back in the days before EU regulations. It was shortly after 1066, and he was a Norman, following William the Conqueror. Osmond himself was no soldier, but a gifted and godly man, with a great gift of administration. He became royal chaplain, and then chancellor in 1072, producing numerous royal letters and charters for the king. In 1078 he was made bishop of Salisbury. As such, he completed and consecrated the cathedral, and formed such an outstanding chapter and constitution that it later became a model for other English cathedrals. Osmond took part in the preparation of the Domesday Book and was present when it was presented to William in April 1086. He died in 1099, well respected for his purity and learning, and his lack of avarice and ambition.



### **6<sup>th</sup> December: How Father Christmas got where he is today**

One person you are bound to run into this Christmas season is Father Christmas. If he looks tired, just remember that he has been around a long time and gone through a lot of transformations.

Father Christmas wasn't always the red-suited, white-bearded star of the retail trade that he is today.



He began life as Nicholas, born way back about AD260 in Patara, an important port on the southern coast of what is now Turkey. When his parents died and left him a fortune, Nicholas gave it away to the poor. He became a bishop of the nearby city of Myra, where he almost certainly suffered persecution and imprisonment at the hand of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Nicholas was a serious theologian: he was a participant at the First Council of Nicaea, which formulated the Creed which we still say today. He even, reportedly, slapped another bishop in a squabble over the exact nature of the Trinity.

Nicholas died in Myra about AD343, but the stories of his generosity and kindness were just beginning. One enduring tale tells of the three girls whom he rescued from certain prostitution by giving them gold for their dowries. When the father confronted him to thank him, Nicholas said he should thank God alone.

In the UK, Nicholas became the basis for Father Christmas, who emerged in Victorian times as a jolly-faced bearded character. Meanwhile, Dutch and German settlers had taken him to America with them as Sinter Klaas and Sankt Nicklas.

It was in America that Nicholas received his final two great breaks into real stardom. The first was when the Rev Clement C Moore, a New York Episcopal minister, turned from his lifework of writing a Hebrew/English lexicon, to write a fun poem for his children one Christmas. His 'The Visit of St Nicholas' is now universally known by its first line: 'T'was the Night Before Christmas'.

From Clement Moore we discovered that St Nicholas is round and pink-cheeked and white-bearded, and that he travels at night with sleigh, reindeer and a sack of toys on his back. It was Clement Moore who also revealed that St Nicholas enters houses down chimneys and fills children's stockings with toys and sweets.

So how did we find out that Father Christmas wears red? That was the US Coca-Cola advertising campaign of 1931, who finally released the latest, up-to-date pictures of Father Christmas: wearing a bright red, fur-trimmed coat and a large belt.

These days, it is good that Father Christmas uses reindeer and doesn't have to pay for petrol. In order to get around all the children in the world on Christmas Eve, he will have to travel 221 million miles at an average speed of 1279 miles a second, 6,395 times the speed of sound. For all those of us who are already exhausted just rushing around getting ready for Christmas, that is a sobering thought.

### **What's in a (Christmas) Name?**



What do your family call him, that cheerful old man in a red robe and floppy hat who pops up everywhere at Christmas?

Sometimes he's Father Christmas, sometimes Santa Claus, and in parts of Europe he's Saint Nicholas. That's his real name, abbreviated to 'Santa Claus' by Brits and Americans who don't like to follow the Europeans, and then turned into a more homely, cuddly kind of name for the children. Whatever he's called, his function is the same – delivering presents to children at Christmas.



## **11<sup>th</sup> December: Daniel the Stylite**

Do you know any odd Christians? People with hearts of gold, who would never harm anyone... but who are nonetheless just plain ODD.... Well, Daniel the Stylite (409-93) should be their patron saint. Perhaps he is the proof that God can bless and use any one of us – no matter how batty some of our ideas may be.

Daniel was born in Mesopotamia in 409 into a devout Christian family. He seems to have been an intense sort of child – when he was only 12 he became a monk. Some years later Daniel visited Antioch, and saw the famed Simeon Stylites, the wild, hairy monk who lived his life perched high on top of a pillar, dropping his fleas and lice on the people below. Most of us would have walked on by, but in that moment Daniel's vocation was born. He climbed a ladder in order to talk to Simeon, and soon after that set out on pilgrimage. At Constantinople he came across a disused temple, reputedly inhabited by devils. Most of us would have walked on by, but Daniel moved straight in. He bolted the door, and stayed inside for the next nine years. Local people fed him through a small window. Braving hideous noises and fighting violent apparitions occupied a lot of Daniel's time – perhaps it was like having a fifth century play-station? Simeon Stylites died in 459, and left Daniel his lice-infested cloak – which inspired him further. With the help of some local admirers, Daniel came out of his temple and set himself up on a pillar just outside the city. The TV programme *Location, Location, Location* would have approved of the view over the Bosphorus, but not the amenities. When Daniel nearly froze to death one night, the Emperor was so worried that he built Daniel a new, more spacious home: TWO pillars close together, with a little shelter on top. Daniel spent the next 33 years on top of his double pillars. People came to him with their problems, and he comforted and advised them. He preached every afternoon, on the love of God. He urged people to show hospitality to each other. He prayed for people. People loved him for it, and God blessed him, even though he did live on top of a pillar. When he eventually died up there, his hair was four cubits long, and he had sat so long with his knees up to his chest that his bones cracked when they straightened the body. So next time you meet a good-hearted but eccentric Christian, take comfort – they could be far worse!

## **17<sup>th</sup> December: Lazarus of Bethany – back from the tomb**

Some people have near-death experiences.... Lazarus should be their patron saint. Except that he went all the way, and actually died for four days. He was quiet in his tomb and the mourners of Bethany were in full swing – before Jesus called him back to life. (See John 11.)

What happened next to Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary? The New Testament never tells us, but there are some clues from early church history and legends. It seems that Lazarus became very popular with the early Christian Church because he was living evidence that Jesus could bring people back from the dead. It also seems that Lazarus was NOT popular with the local Jews, for the very same reason. They wanted to forget Jesus, and here Lazarus was still walking around, talking about resurrection... So eventually some exasperated Jews decided to act. According to an early Eastern tradition, they placed Lazarus and his sisters into a leaky boat and set them adrift in the Mediterranean.... where the little boat carried them safely to Cyprus. Here Lazarus became bishop and lived for another 30 years.

Another, later, tradition has it that the boat had no rudder or oars, but still bore them safely to Gaul, where Lazarus founded a church and became the first bishop of Marseilles, so to speak... until he was martyred under Domitian (81-96AD).

Either way, second time round, Lazarus stayed dead. But it was thought he was still at work. By the late Middle Ages, anyone who had a vision of the afterlife knew just whom to thank for this 'postcard from heaven' – St Lazarus!



## Eglantyne Jebb – founder of ‘Save the Children’

Here is a modern-day saint whose compassion and determination has saved literally millions of lives.

Eglantyne did not begin as an obvious ‘mover and shaker’ of people. Born in Shropshire in 1876, she grew up in Ellesmere, studied history at Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford, taught at Marlborough, and then resigned as she was not physically robust. Eglantyne moved to live with her mother in Cambridge, and it would have been so easy to settle for a life of peaceful obscurity. But she was a Christian, and at Oxford she had developed a passion for social concerns, so this compassion now drove her to take action.

She began in 1906 by publishing research on the poverty she’d found in Cambridge. Then in 1912 the Balkan Wars broke out, and Eglantyne left Cambridge for Macedonia. Her months among the refugees led her to decide that long-term constructive aid was more effective than short-term handouts. The First World War left Eglantyne horrified by the prolonged Allied blockade on Germany and Austria-Hungary, which even after Armistice meant starvation for millions of civilians, especially children. And so in 1919 Eglantyne and her sister Dorothy Buxton helped found the ‘Fight the Famine’ Council, which wanted to end the blockade and establish a League of Nations. One day during a rally in Trafalgar Square, Eglantyne was arrested for distributing a leaflet showing starving children which read: “Our blockade has caused this – millions of children are starving to death.” She ended up in court and was fined, but the judge was so impressed with Eglantyne’s commitment to children that he himself paid her fine. His money became the first donation to Save the Children, the new charity just set up by Eglantyne and Dorothy.



Save the Children was officially launched at the Albert Hall in May 1919, with the aim of helping the starving civilians of central Europe. It was a success, raising £400,000 in that first year alone.

When in the autumn of 1921 Russia was facing famine, Save the Children chartered a cargo ship, the SS Torcello, to carry 600 tons of lifesaving food and medical supplies to Russia – saving hundreds of thousands of lives. By 1922 Save the Children had become one of Britain’s biggest charities. Eglantyne’s Declaration of the Rights of the Child, written in 1923, was adopted by the League of Nations the following year. The present-day UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is derived from it. But ten years of running Save the Children had sapped Eglantyne’s fragile strength, and she died in Geneva in 1928, aged only 52.

### **21<sup>st</sup> December:     Winter Solstice**

A Midwinter festival has been a part of life since pre-Christian times. When the hours of daylight are fewest, the warmth of the sun weakest, and life itself seemingly at a standstill, our ancestors, the pagan peoples of Europe and Western Asia, kept festival by lighting bonfires and decorating their buildings with evergreens. Perhaps they believed that the dying sun could be enheartened by fire, and the life of the buried seed assured by the presence of evergreen branches. With the advent of Christianity, the Spring gods became identified with Christ, and the birthday of the sun with the birthday of the Light of the World. The early church father Tertullian did not approve of Christmas decorations. “Let those who have no light in themselves light candles!... You are the light of the world, you are the tree ever green...” But by the time of St Gregory and St Augustine, four centuries later, this had changed. Pope Gregory instructed Augustine not to worry about harmless outward customs, as long as the right God be worshipped through them. And so many Anglo-Saxon customs were never discarded, but simply endowed with a new significance. By 1598 one John Stow of London wrote how: “Against the feast of Christmas, every man’s house, as also their parish churches, were decked with holme, ivie, bayes, and whatsoever the season of the yeare afforded to be greene.”

## 24<sup>th</sup> December: Christmas Eve

How do you celebrate Christmas Eve? It has its own customs, the most popular of which is going to Midnight Mass, or the Christ-Mas. This is the only Mass of the year that is allowed to start after sunset. In Catholic countries such as Spain, Italy and Poland, Midnight Mass is in fact the most important church service of the entire Christmas season, and many people traditionally fast beforehand. In other countries, such as Belgium and Denmark, people dine during the evening, and then go on to the Midnight Service.

The British are behind some countries when it comes to exchanging presents: in Germany, Sweden and Portugal the custom is to exchange on Christmas Eve. But the British are ahead of Serbia and Slovakia, where the Christmas tree is not even brought into the house and decorated until Christmas Eve.

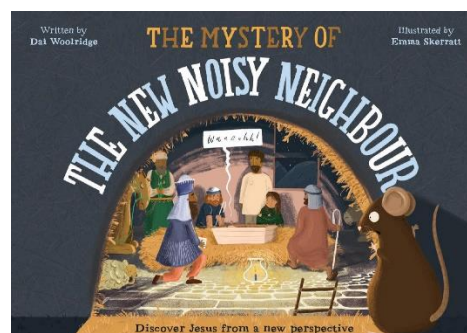
Yule logs are not so popular since the decline of the fireplace, but traditionally it was lit on Christmas Eve from a bit of the previous year's log, and then would be burned non-stop until 12<sup>th</sup> Night (6<sup>th</sup> January). Tradition also decreed that any greenery such as holly, ivy or mistletoe must wait until Christmas Eve until being brought into the house.



### BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS:

#### **The New Noisy Neighbour** by Dai Woolridge, Bible Society, £2

This children's story places a mouse detective at the heart of the action in Bethlehem, and he slowly discovers who Jesus really is: Emmanuel, Rescuer and King. It is perfect to give out as a free gift to children in your church or local school.



### BOOKS FOR CHRITMAS:



#### **Free at Last** by Asia Bibi, Authentic, £9.99

Here is the remarkable story of the woman who refused to renounce her faith and unwittingly became the global symbol of the fight against religious extremism. After drinking water from the same glass as a Muslim woman, Asia Bibi, a Christian, was sentenced to hang by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 2010 on charges of blasphemy.

Bibi's case polarised all of Pakistan and mobilised international support from across the globe, including politicians, journalists, and countless organisations. For nine long years, Bibi awaited death in prison until she was formally acquitted in January 2019. Now a political exile, Bibi is reunited with her family in the West, but she will never be allowed to return to her homeland.



## Christmas throughout the Christian world

For nearly four weeks leading up to Christmas Christians recognise a period called Advent. It means 'coming'. It is a time of spiritual preparation. 'Coming' refers to Jesus' first coming as a baby, but it also looks forward to a day when Jesus is expected to return in triumph at His 'second coming' to establish perfect justice and a new order of peace.

Originally Christians marked Advent as a time when they refrained from excessive eating and drinking. Then Christmas Day reintroduced them to the joys of feasting. Christmas celebrations lasted for 12 days, with gifts exchanged as a climax at Epiphany (6<sup>th</sup> January). Today, however, Advent is more likely to be associated with accelerating festivity, with the days following Christmas something of an anti-climax until 'twelfth night', on which decorations are removed. Many Christians worldwide are trying to revive the spirit of Advent by setting aside time to pray and address global poverty.

Christmas Day is celebrated as the anniversary of Jesus' birth, although the actual date is not known. Most Christians celebrate it on 25<sup>th</sup> December. However, the Orthodox Church (the ancient churches in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia) follows a different calendar and celebrates on 7<sup>th</sup> January. Christians make a point of taking communion on Christmas Day. Many make it the first thing they do as the clock strikes midnight.

On 6<sup>th</sup> January the Christmas festival continues with a celebration of Epiphany, which means 'the appearance'. Christians remember the visit of wise men (magi) to Jesus, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Christmas tradition of exchanging gifts originally honoured these men, who were the first non-Jews (Gentiles) to worship Jesus. It forms a reminder that in Jesus God was giving Himself for the benefit of the entire world.

Orthodox Christians use this day to recall the baptism of Jesus as a grown man. The significance of Jesus being baptised was that He identified Himself with human beings in all their need. They mark the day by praying for God's blessing on rivers, wells and water sources.

Christmas has never been just an escapist festival for Christians. Those who treat it seriously recognise that not all the world is able to face the days with frivolity or joy. The day after Christmas, Boxing Day, was historically marked as the feast of St Stephen. He was the first man to be put to death rather than give up his belief that Jesus was God.

And two days later a day remembering the Massacre of the Innocents recalls Herod's attempt to destroy Jesus by killing all male babies in Bethlehem. Although not so widely marked as Christmas Day, it gives Christians the opportunity to pray for children in today's world who suffer as a result of the actions of adults.

*This is from: [https://christianity.org.uk/christmas-throughout-the-christian-world/#.W9LI\\_xNKhsM](https://christianity.org.uk/christmas-throughout-the-christian-world/#.W9LI_xNKhsM)*



## 25th December

### The history of Christmas



The Bible does not give a date for the birth of Jesus. In the third century it was suggested that Jesus was conceived at the Spring equinox, 25<sup>th</sup> March, popularising the belief that He was born nine months later on 25<sup>th</sup> December. John Chrysostom, the Archbishop of Constantinople, encouraged Christians worldwide to make Christmas a holy day in about 400.

In the early Middle Ages, Christians celebrated a series of midwinter holy days. Epiphany (which recalls the visit to the infant Jesus of the wise men bearing gifts) was the climax of 12 days of Christmas, beginning on 25<sup>th</sup> December. The Emperor Charlemagne chose 25<sup>th</sup> December for his coronation in 800, and the prominence of Christmas Day rose. In England, William the Conqueror also chose 25<sup>th</sup> December for his coronation in 1066, and the date became a fixture both for religious observance and feasting.

Cooking a boar was a common feature of mediaeval Christmas feasts, and singing carols accompanied it. Writers of the time lament the fact that the true significance of Christmas was being lost because of partying. They condemn the rise of 'misrule' – drunken dancing and promiscuity. The day was a public holiday, and traditions of bringing evergreen foliage into the house and the exchange of gifts (usually on Epiphany) date from this time.

In the 17th century the rise of new Protestant denominations led to a rejection of many celebrations that were associated with Catholic Christianity. Christmas was one of them. After the execution of Charles I, England's Puritan rulers made the celebration of Christmas illegal for 14 years. The restoration of Charles II ended the ban, but religious leaders continued to discourage excess, especially in Scotland. In Western Europe (but not worldwide) the day for exchanging gifts changed from Epiphany (6<sup>th</sup> January) to Christmas Day.

By the 1820s, the significance of Christmas was declining. Charles Dickens was one of several writers who sought to restore it. His novel *A Christmas Carol* was significant in reviving merriment during the festival. He emphasised charity and family reunions, alongside religious observance. Christmas trees, paper chains, cards and many well-known carols date from this time. So did the tradition of Boxing Day, on 26<sup>th</sup> December, when tradesmen who had given reliable service during the year would collect 'boxes' of money or gifts from their customers.

In Europe Santa Claus is the figure associated with the bringing of gifts. Santa Claus is a shortening of the name of Saint Nicholas, who was a Christian bishop in the fourth century in present-day Turkey. He was particularly noted for his care for children and for his generosity to the poor. By the Middle Ages his appearance, in red bishop's robes and a mitre, was adored in the Netherlands and familiar across Europe.

Father Christmas dates from 17th century England, where he was a secular figure of good cheer (more associated with drunkenness than gifts). The transformation of Santa Claus into today's Father Christmas started in New York in the 1880s, where his red robes and white beard became potent advertising symbols. In some countries (such as Latin America and Eastern Europe) the tradition attempts to combine the secular and religious elements by holding that Santa Claus makes children's presents and then gives them to the baby Jesus to distribute.

From: <https://christianity.org.uk/the-history-of-christmas/#.W9LmchNKhsM>





## The story of the Christingle

The word 'Christingle' actually means 'Christ Light', and celebrates the light of Jesus coming into the world. Stories of how the Christingle began look back to the Moravian Church, which is found in the Czech Republic. The Moravians have held Christingle services for more than 200 years, and according to them, this is how the first Christingle might have been made:

Many years ago the children in a village were asked to bring a Christmas gift to put beside the crib in the church. One family was very poor, and had no money for gifts, but the three children were still determined to take something. The only nice thing they had was an orange, so they decided to give the Christ-child that.

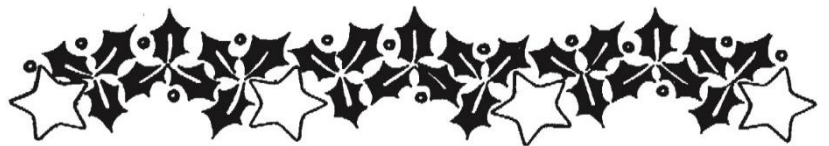
But then they discovered the top was going green, so the eldest cut it out, and put a candle in the hole. To add some colour, one of the girls took a red ribbon from her hair and tied it around the middle of the orange. It was hard to make the ribbon stay still, so they fastened it in place with toothpicks. The toothpicks looked a bit bare, so the youngest child added some raisins to them.



The children took their decorated orange lantern to the church for the Christmas Mass. The other children sneered at their meagre gift, but the priest seized upon it with joy. He held it up as an example of the true understanding of the meaning of Christmas, for the following reasons: the orange is round, like the world; the candle gives us light in the dark, like the love of God; the red ribbon goes round the 'world', as a symbol of Christ's blood, given for everyone; the four sticks point in all directions, and symbolise that God is over all: North, South, East and West; and the fruit and nuts remind us of God's blessings.

The Children's Society first introduced the Christingle Service to The Church of England in 1968, and it has since become a popular event in the church calendar. This candlelit celebration is an ideal way to share the key messages of the Christian faith, while helping to raise vital funds to help vulnerable children across the country. Visit: [www.childrenssociety.org.uk](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk)

## Why begin at midnight with Holy Communion?



The hour was first chosen at Rome in the fifth century to symbolise the idea that Christ was born at midnight – a mystical idea in no way hindered by historical evidence! No one knows the real hour of His birth.

Certainly, in recent times, Holy Communion at midnight on Christmas morning has proved popular with modern families. One British writer pointed out its "domestic convenience" in 1947: "for where there are children and no servants, husband and wife may be unable to communicate at any other time." (So things don't change, then!)



## 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.



### And there were shepherds...

Luke's story of the birth of Jesus is brilliantly told – the angel's visit to Mary to tell her she would be mother of the long-promised Messiah, the old priest in the Temple told by another angel that his wife would have a son to be called 'John', who would prepare the people of Israel for that event, and then Mary and Joseph making the 60 mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, as required by the Roman census. When they got there, no room at the inn, and they settled instead for a convenient stable, where Mary gave birth to a boy child. Suddenly, Luke changes the tone. 'And there were shepherds ...' – that's what he actually wrote, just like that. 'And there were shepherds', doing exactly what shepherds do, looking after their flocks by night. But this night was different: yet another angelic message – a call to abandon their sheep and go into Bethlehem to see the baby Messiah. They were given directions and a 'sign' to identify Him. He would be lying in a feeding trough. Well, at least they would recognise that. And why the shepherds, in this glorious story of our salvation? Because the event needed witnesses, and the chosen witnesses would be this bunch of scruffy, smelly shepherds straight from the sheep-pen. Nothing could speak more eloquently of God's purpose than that. This was not a Saviour for the strong, rich and powerful, but for everybody. The carpenter and his wife guarded the Saviour of the world, and the very first witnesses were not kings or priests but a handful of shabby shepherds.





### **Where did Christmas trees come from?**

There are two early stories that mention fir trees. The first involves St Boniface, who went to Germany in the 8<sup>th</sup> century as a missionary and found people sacrificing a child to their god under an oak tree. Boniface was appalled, and he rescued the child. He then chopped down the oak tree and found a tiny fir tree growing nearby. He gave this to the people and said: "This is a symbol of life. Whenever you look at this tree, remember the Christ-child who is the One who will give you life, because He gave His life for you."

The second early fir tree story involves Martin Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that one year he decided to drag a fir tree into his home and to decorate it with candles. He used it as a visual aid, telling people that the candles symbolised Jesus as the light of the world, and the evergreen tree symbolised the eternal life that Jesus gives to us. Many of the people who followed Luther were struck by the idea and took up the custom.

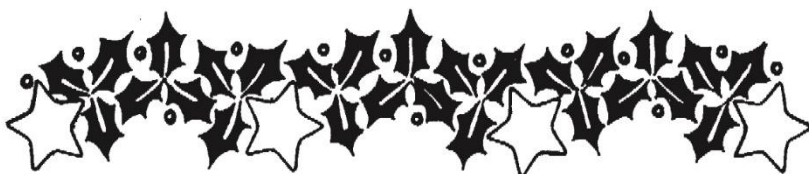
### **Where did Christmas stockings come from?**



No one is really sure, but a story is told of St Nicholas, a bishop who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, who may have started the custom by accident. St Nicholas was of a wealthy family, and of a generous heart. As Christmas approached one year, he wanted to help a poor family whom he knew, but he did not want them to know it was him. So he climbed up on their roof on Christmas Eve and dropped some coins down the chimney.

The next morning the coins, to the great surprise of the family, were found in the stockings of the ladies, who had hung them to dry by the fire the night before. Every year after that they put their stockings out, in the hope that some more money would fall into them. They told the story of this amazing appearance to their friends and neighbours, and the custom caught on.

### **Why was Jesus born in a barn?**



Our pretty Christmas cards do not do it justice – the stable that Jesus was born in would have been smelly, dirty, and full of mess. So why did God not provide something better for His beloved Son? Why let Joseph and Mary scrounge around until they ended up in a smelly stable?

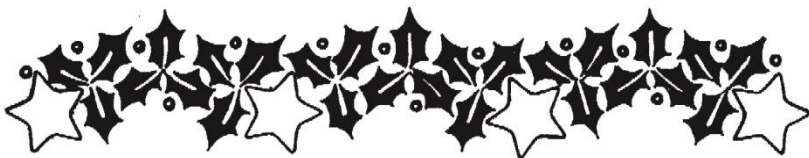
Perhaps because the King of Kings being born in a foul stable is a perfect picture of redemption. Jesus came from glory into a world filled with the dirt, filth and darkness of sin. And Jesus was not put off by darkness in the least – instead, He came to be the Light of the World. Thank God for His unspeakable gift. No wonder the angels sang "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." (Luke 2:14)

## 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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’.



## The story of mince pies

Did you know that mince pies have been traditional English Christmas fare since the Middle Ages, when meat was a key ingredient? The addition of spices, suet and alcohol to meat came about because it was an alternative to salting and smoking in order to preserve the food. Mince pies used to be a different shape – cradle-shaped with a pastry baby Jesus on top.



## World’s oldest fake tree

Did you know that it is a family in Wiltshire, the Parkers, who claim to own the world’s oldest artificial Christmas tree? It was bought in 1886, and it is still put up every year.



## Mistletoe’s smelly history

Did you know that the word ‘mistletoe’ means dung on a tree? The Anglo-Saxons thought that mistletoe grew in trees where birds had left their droppings. Mistel means dung, and tan means twig.



**We three kings of Orient are... what?**



“A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey, in. The way’s deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in *solstitio brumali*, the very dead of winter.” (TS Eliot)

It was 1622, and the Bishop of Winchester, Launcelot Andrews, was preaching a magnificent sermon to King James I. Reckoned one of the best preachers ever, Launcelot Andrews’ words were later taken up by T S Eliot and transformed into his wonderful poem ‘The Journey of the Magi’. What a vivid picture – we can see it all! The camels’ breath steaming in the night air as the kings, in their gorgeous robes of silk and cloth-of-gold, and clutching their precious gifts, kneel to adore the baby in the manger.

Yet the Bible does not give us as much detail as some people think. Tradition down the centuries has added a great deal more. For instance, we know from St Matthew that the magi were ‘wise’, or learned men of some sort, but we do not know if they were kings or not. The Bible tells us there were several; tradition has decided upon three, and even named them: Balthassar, Melchior, and Caspar (or Gaspar). But the Bible does tell us that the magi gave baby Jesus three highly symbolic gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. Gold stands for kingship, frankincense for worship, and myrrh for anointing – anticipating His death. There is a lovely ancient mosaic in Ravenna, Italy, that is 1,500 years old. It depicts the wise men in oriental garb of trousers and Phrygian caps, carrying their gifts past palm trees towards the star that they followed... straight to Jesus.



**Thank Dickens for Christmas as you know it!**

Ever wonder where many of our Christmas traditions come from? A surprising amount of our modern Christmas celebrations can be traced back to the well-loved story of ‘A Christmas Carol’, by Charles Dickens.

When you read ‘A Christmas Carol’, you discover almost a template of the ‘ideal Christmas’ which we still hold dear today. Dickens seems to have selected the best of the Christmas celebrations of his day (he ignored some of the odd excesses) and packaged them in such a way as to give us traditions that we could accommodate and treasure – more than a century later.

So, for instance, in *A Christmas Carol*, Christmas is a family day, with a family-centred feast. In a home decorated with holly and candles the characters enjoy a roast turkey, followed by Christmas pudding. They give their loved ones presents. Scrooge even gives donations to charity (!).

And all the while outside, there is snow and frost, while church bells ring, and carol singers sing, and hope for mulled wine. In ‘A Christmas Carol’ there is even a Father Christmas – in the shape of Christmas Present. Only the Christmas tree itself came later, when Prince Albert imported ‘a pretty German toy’ that won the heart of the English court, and hence the rest of Victorian society.

## Christmas and St Luke's Gospel

It is to St Luke's wonderful gospel that many Christians turn as the year draws to a close and Christmas approaches, for it is to St Luke that we owe the fullest account of the nativity.



Luke alone tells us the story of Mary and the angel's visit to her, and has thus given the Church the wonderful Magnificat of Mary.

Luke alone tells us the story of Simeon's hymn of praise, thus giving us the wonderful Nunc Dimmittis. Imagine an Anglican evensong without the Nunc Dimmittis.



Luke alone tells us the story of how the angels appeared to the shepherds and how the shepherds then visited the infant Jesus. So – imagine Christmas cards and nativity scenes every year without the shepherds arriving to visit baby Jesus. Imagine school nativity plays without our children dressed as shepherds or sheep. So – thank you, Luke! What makes it so amazing is that Luke was not a Jew! The man who wrote the fullest nativity story, and indeed more of the New Testament than any other single person, was a Gentile!



### Was Jesus really born on 25<sup>th</sup> December?

Almost certainly not. But the story of how that date came to be chosen as His 'birthday' is one that stretches back long before His birth. It seems to have started on the Greek island of Rhodes in 283 BC. That year the solstice fell on 25<sup>th</sup> December, and it was also the year that the Ancient World's largest Sun God statue – the 34 metre, 200 tonne Colossus of Rhodes, was consecrated. By 46 BC, Julius Caesar had made 25<sup>th</sup> December the official winter solstice. In AD 274, the Roman Emperor Aureilian chose the winter solstice to be the birthday of the Sun God. He also decreed that *Sol Invictus* (the unconquered sun) was 'Lord of the Roman Empire'. 50 years after that, and Constantine had become the first pro-Christian Roman Emperor. He wanted the Church to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ on 25<sup>th</sup> December. Perhaps it was that to him, Jesus was more or less the same person as the mighty Sun God. Or perhaps he felt that the ancient Sun God's association with goodness, light, warmth and life would help ease the people's transition from paganism to Christianity. Whatever the reason, the Church went along with it, and chose 25<sup>th</sup> December to be the date of Christmas. And in an ancient mosaic in the crypt of St Peter's Cathedral, Jesus is portrayed as adorned with sun rays and riding in a chariot – just like *Sol Invictus*. As for the huge, bronze 200 tonne *Sol Invictus*? He fell over during an earthquake and was sold off for scrap metal in 654AD by an enterprising Arab scrap merchant. Meanwhile, Jesus lives on...





## **26<sup>th</sup> December: St Stephen – the first martyr (died c 35 AD)**

Have you ever stopped to consider that the very first martyr of the Christian Church was a deacon? (But no, he wasn't worked to death by his church.) It was Stephen, one of the first seven deacons of the Christian Church. He'd been appointed by the apostles to look after the distribution of alms to the faithful poor, and to help in the ministry of preaching.

Acts 6 and 7 tells us all that we know of his life, and the passages seem to suggest that he was an educated Hellenistic Jew. Certainly, Stephen's famous challenge to the Jews reveals him to have been learned in the Scriptures and the history of Judaism, besides being eloquent and forceful.

Stephen's proclamation on the day of his martyrdom pulled no punches. He told the Jews that God did not depend on the Temple. The Temple was but a temporary institution destined to be fulfilled and superseded by Christ, who was the prophet foreseen by Moses as the Messiah for whom the Jewish race had so long awaited.

Stephen then challenged his hearers for resisting the Spirit and for killing the Christ, as their fathers before them had killed the prophets. The Jews were so outraged by this that they stoned Stephen on the spot for blasphemy.

As he died, Stephen saw a vision of Christ on God's right hand. The men who were witness to the stoning placed their clothes at the feet of Saul (afterwards Paul), who (to his deep regret later) consented to Stephen's death.

By the fourth century Stephen had his own feast day in both East and West Churches. When his supposed tomb was discovered in 415, his popularity soared. His (supposed) relics were taken to Constantinople and then Rome, along with some stones (allegedly) used at his martyrdom.

Early on the Church made Stephen the patron saint of deacons. In the late Middle Ages he was also invoked to help against headaches (?!).

In England, 46 ancient churches are dedicated to him, most of them built after the Norman Conquest. In art Stephen is usually given a book of the Gospels and a stone, and sometimes the palm of martyrdom.

### **On the Feast of Stephen**

Everyone knows that it was on the feast of Stephen that 'good king Wenceslas looked on'. After all, it's in a Christmas carol – but why? There's nothing about Christmas in it: a splendid young page who rustled up some flesh, wine and logs, an old man out in the snow ('deep and crisp and even') and a kindly monarch. But *Christmas*?

The clue is in 'the feast of Stephen', which falls on 26<sup>th</sup> December, or 'Boxing Day', as we know it. That, too, has nothing to do with Christmas, beyond the fact that in the past people put a contribution in tradesmen's boxes as a kind of Christmas present for their services during the year.

The Stephen whose feast day falls on the day after Christmas was the first Christian martyr. (You can read his story in the book of Acts). He was a member of the church in Jerusalem in its very early days, and soon found himself involved with six others in administering the allocation of food to those in need. The apostles, who were the leaders of the church, felt that it wasn't appropriate for them to abandon preaching and 'serve tables', so they selected these seven to do the job for them. Stephen, however, quickly revealed hidden gifts as an eloquent spokesman for the Christian cause.

The Temple authorities, who had already had trouble with the apostles, were soon alerted to this new and hitherto unknown evangelist. They decided to make an example of him, thus firing a warning shot, as it were, across the bows of the apostles themselves. So, they arrested Stephen and accused him of speaking against the two central elements of their religion – the 'holy place' (the Temple) and 'the customs Moses handed down to us' (the Law). It's always dangerous to criticise a monument or a custom!

Given the right to defend himself, Stephen instead launched into an eloquent and at times biting account of Jewish history, culminating in the accusation that they had committed the worst possible sin by killing the Messiah. Inflamed by his words, his hearers abandoned any pretence of legal impartiality, rushing towards him and dragging him out of the city to a place where they began to stone him to death. Stephen, the rank and file Christian, died under a hail of rocks for claiming that Mary's Son was the promised Messiah.

That is most probably the reason why the first martyr is honoured on the day after we celebrate the birth of the Saviour. It's a bit like the myrrh in the gifts of the Wise Men – a reminder, as we celebrate, that the bitter shadow of a cross is never far away from this story.

### **Look out for Wenceslas**

Most of us probably know that on 26<sup>th</sup> December (the Feast of Stephen) 'Good king Wenceslas' looked out....' We probably also know that the snow lay round about, 'deep and crisp and even'. Beyond that, he's just someone in a carol that's not often sung nowadays.

However, Wenceslas was a real person, a duke, and effectively king of Bohemia in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In modern terms, he was Czechoslovakian. He was known as a generous and kind monarch, deeply Christian and given to good works. So, the story in the carol by the Victorian hymn-writer J.M. Neale, while possibly fictitious, is at least in line with his recognised character. 'Page and monarch' braved the 'bitter weather' and the 'cruel wind's wild lament' to take food and fuel to a poor man living rough.

Neale's carol was enormously popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because it perfectly expressed Victorian Christian ideals of benevolence and almsgiving. Christian men of 'wealth and rank' are urged to help the poor, and so 'find blessing'. Ignoring the 'wealth and rank and men' bit, it's still good advice, at Christmas or any other time

### **In praise of Good King Wenceslas**

When I was a choir boy many years ago, *writes David Winter*, 'Good King Wenceslas' was a very popular carol. A man sang the King's lines, a boy sang the Page's, and the choir filled in the narrative. It was not of course

technically a Christmas carol but one for which most people know as 'Boxing Day' – the 'Feast of Stephen' the first Christian martyr.

But you don't hear Good King Wenceslas these days. It fell out of political correctness. The king was wealthy and very kindly, helped a poor man, but the last verse was the problem. It called on 'Christian men, wealth and rank possessing'. To help the poor and be blessed in doing it. All considered very patronising, class-conscious, and chauvinistic. So, it has simply disappeared.

I think that's a pity, and I also think it's a serious misunderstanding of the carol. It relates to the good deeds of a tenth century Duke of Bohemia, Wenceslas I, and concerns a king and his page, and a poor man freezing and potentially starving whom he saw from his window.

The king didn't, as he might well have done, simply order some minion to take the man some food or fuel. He decided to do it himself assisted by his young page. Together they braved the bitter wind and snow in order to take pine logs and food to this humble dwelling. That is not patronising but true Christian grace.

Yes, the last verse does express a Victorian view of characters but that's when it was written. No one should condemn the carol and its message. Who would shrink from following its example? I'm afraid texting a token ten quid to a charity does not quite qualify.



yl.

## **28<sup>th</sup> December:     Holy Innocents**

The death of a very young child is perhaps the hardest grief of all to bear. So, the 28<sup>th</sup> December is a very poignant day in the church calendar. It is when the worldwide Church joins with bereaved parents to grieve the loss of babies and young children. For Holy Innocents day recalls the massacre of the young male children of Bethlehem by Herod the Great.

Herod had been told by the Magi, or Wise Men, that a great king had been born in Bethlehem, and he felt shaken. How could a child in unimportant little Bethlehem be so powerful that the stars in the night sky honoured His birth?! Herod took the Magi so seriously that he decided to try and kill this new young rival. He decreed that every male baby of two years and under should be killed. (Matthew 2:1-18).

Bethlehem was not a large place, and Bible commentators estimate that between six and 25 infants were slaughtered by Roman soldiers. Their mothers were inconsolable at the death of their babies, as indeed mothers have always been. The death of these innocent baby boys of Bethlehem became a feast-day in the western Church by the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This was because the Church considered them to be martyrs because they not only died *for* Christ, *but instead of* Christ.

Down the centuries, the tragic loss of the Holy Innocents has touched the imagination and hearts of poets, preachers and artists. Though heart-broken parents still grieve today, the Church can offer them one firm assurance: that young children who die to this world will undoubtedly "this day be with Me in Paradise." The One who eagerly said "Suffer the little children to *come unto Me*" will be the last person to turn them away.





## Joseph and his Amazing Journey

*David Pickup a solicitor, considers government inspired travel - or lockdown!*

*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world... And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David. (Luke 2 1-4)*

What a year we have had! But I suppose Joseph had had a demanding year as well. Having learning that his betrothed was pregnant due to divine intervention, he then learned of the Roman government's demand for a census. These Bible verses show Joseph being a good citizen. Leaving home for a long journey in order to please the government would not have been welcome, but Joseph complied and obeyed the law. This year the situation is reversed. Millions of us *want* to make a long journey, to visit our loved ones across the UK. But this year, because of coronavirus, the Government is asking us to stay at home. The Romans had censuses for a good reason: to help them run the business of the empire. This Government has restrictions in place for a good reason: to help to slow the spread of a deadly virus. Following government rules and laws is not always easy or pleasant but as Christians we should be good citizens.

This is a light-hearted guide to a complicated subject. If you are going home for Christmas, get proper advice – and have a Merry one.



## BEETHOVEN: 'from the heart to the heart'

*The Revd Michael Burgess considers the life and work of a genius.*

This year, 2020, is a special year for Beethoven: it marks the 250th anniversary of his birth on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1770.

And so it was very fitting that back in August, at the first Live Prom this year in the Royal Albert Hall, the BBC Symphony Orchestra played his 3rd symphony, the *Eroica*. Beethoven composed it in 1804. A few years earlier he had noticed the first symptoms of his deafness. He wrote in a letter to his brothers that was found after his death, '*I must live like an exile.*' The deafness brought in its wake depression and thoughts of suicide, but Beethoven wrote that '*the only thing that held me back was my art.*' He went on to compose works which expressed the tragedy this cross of deafness brought, but also conveyed the power of the human spirit which proved indomitable in the face of that struggle. '*Music,*' he wrote, '*is the electric soil in which the spirit thinks, lives and invents.*' Beethoven was to compose six more symphonies after the *Eroica* and a wealth of other music up to his death in 1827. He spent most of his life in Vienna, but through his music his creative genius travelled far and wide. Scholars divide his work into three stages. Up to 1800 he composed very much in the classical tradition. That year marked a second stage with works like the 5th Symphony, which opens with the famous eight-note motif of fate knocking at the door, and his opera *Fidelio*. Then in 1817 came a final stage when his compositions explored new territories of the human spirit altogether. Although his deafness brought loneliness and isolation, he found in music the means to express those experiences: his struggle with Destiny, his love of Nature and that search for an inner peace and serenity. Weighed down by physical limitations, he found a freedom to express himself and his longing for transcendence and light. It is there in the Prisoners' Chorus in his opera *Fidelio* as they emerge from the dungeon into the sunlight. And it is quintessentially present in his last great works: the late String Quartets, the 9th Symphony with its exultant hymn to Joy, and the Missa Solemnis where there is a beauty and a serenity in the Benedictus and Agnus Dei. On the score of this work, Beethoven wrote above the Kyrie *It comes from the heart – may it go to the heart*. In this month which marks the 250th anniversary of his birth, we give thanks for his music which continues to speak to hearts in every age. It is music that tells us of the pain and struggle of life, but also the discovery of a courage and freedom that can help us to step out in his company and welcome the light and the joy, the peace and the beauty.



## Going to church in the coronavirus pandemic

Figures from the Church of England's **A Church Near You** website, which allows people to search for church services and events, show that more than 17,000 online services or events are now listed, including Sunday Communion services, Bible studies and morning or night prayer. Many of these services take place regularly and this figure represents a snapshot of the likely total number.

The statistics do not include the Church of England's national online weekly services broadcast on Sundays and shared on Facebook and YouTube. There have been nearly three million views of the national online services and posts about the weekly broadcasts have been seen 23.6 million times. Contributors have included the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Duke of Cambridge and Pope Francis. The national online services are being watched by a wide range of ages and around one in five people viewing go to church infrequently or not at all. Other figures in the report show that official Church of England apps from Church House Publishing – the most popular being Daily Prayer, or the Daily Office of morning, evening and night prayer – have been used more than seven million times so far this year, up from five million in 2019. Church of England social media posts have been seen 86 million times so far, nearly double the total for last year.

The growth in online services has been helped by the Church of England stepping up its digital training programme for congregations. More than 4,200 vicars and local church leaders have taken part in remote digital training courses so far this year, four times the number as in 2019. The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said: "At a time when many have felt isolated and fearful, Church of England parishes and clergy have broadcast thousands of online church services and events, seeking to bring comfort and hope to their communities. We know that tens of thousands of those tuning in will never have had contact with their local Church of England parish before and may never have heard the Christian message. Their welcome presence is a sign of the great hunger we all have for spiritual meaning in our lives."



## The Arab Spring of 2010

*Tim Lenton looks back on a season of hope that has faded...*

The so-called Arab Spring started 10 years ago, in December 2010, when Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest at police seizing his vegetable stand over failure to obtain a permit. What was originally Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution became a tsunami of demonstrations, protests, riots, coups, foreign interventions and civil wars throughout North Africa and the Middle East. The leaders and governments of several countries were overthrown and ousted, and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was killed a year later. The effects in Tunisia were mainly favourable, but elsewhere they were mixed, and in some cases disastrous. Full-scale civil wars erupted in countries such as Libya, Syria and Yemen. In Egypt authoritarian rule seems to have returned after the ousting of President Mubarak, and Libya remains in a state of violent and largely anarchic civil war, contributing significantly to the worldwide refugee crisis. In Syria, although ISIS has largely been defeated, the oppressive regime of long-time dictator Bashar al Assad persists. The anti-Christian sentiments of almost all Arab Spring groups means that violence against Christians has increased considerably. Islamic State, which emerged as a result, is known particularly for its ethnic cleansing of Christians and other faith groups in Syria and Iraq.





## John Lennon – 40 years since his death

*Tim Lenton recalls a murder that shocked the world.*

It was 40 years ago, on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1980, that John Lennon – rock musician, peace activist and a founder of the Beatles – was shot dead, aged 40, outside his New York City apartment by Mark Chapman, a deranged fan.

Lennon is usually regarded as anti-Christian, but he denied being “anti-Christ or anti-religion”. Three months before he died he said he had a spiritual side, but “the whole religion business suffers from the ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers’ bit. There’s too much talk about soldiers and marching and converting”.

As a youngster Lennon attended St Peter’s Anglican Church in South Liverpool, where he was a member of the youth group, but his post-Beatles single *Imagine* is widely regarded as being an “atheist anthem”, and his remark in 1966 that the Beatles had become more popular than Jesus led to threats, protests and record-burning in America.

However, in the 1970s Lennon did in fact show a strong interest in Christianity, saying the Beatles were always on the side of Christ. In 1977 he wrote some Christian songs and told friends he had become a born-again Christian. But his wife Yoko Ono took him to Tokyo and pulled him away from this; eventually he was said to have retained only universal list ideas.



## The first Christmas crib



The first Christmas crib were made by St. Francis of Assisi in a cave in the Italian town of **Greccio**.

They were “live Christmas Crib” as Francis put a newborn between the ox and the donkey. Christmas Crib are representation of the birth of Jesus as described in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Christmas Crib are placed in homes on Christmas Eve and stay until the feast of Epiphany, and in the churches until the feast of the Baptism of Jesus. The first Christmas crib with figures, were placed in the convent of Fussen in Bavaria, 1252. Christmas Crib as we know them date back to the 16th century and flourished after the First World War.



## I’m dreaming of a “white” Christmas

Most of us think of a white Christmas as being a blanket of snow covering hillsides for miles around, or even in the churchyard, but did you know that Christmas can be white if only one solitary snowflake falls in a specific location (anywhere in the UK) during the 24 hours of Christmas day (traditionally the Met Office used its building in London to decide whether it had been a white Christmas). Are we expecting snow this year - we’ll have to wait and see.





## Bonnie Prince Charlie

*Tim Lenton looks back on the tragic life of a would-be king.*

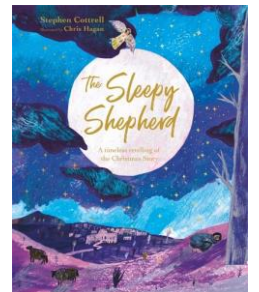
Three hundred years ago, on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1720, Charles Edward Stuart, commonly known as “Bonnie Prince Charlie”, was born in Italy. He was leader of the unsuccessful Jacobite rebellion of 1745-46 – a turning point in British history. Charles believed the British throne to be his birthright as the grandson of King James II, a Roman Catholic who had been ousted to make way for the Protestant William of Orange in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Charles intended, with the help of France and the Scots, to remove William’s Hanoverian successor George II – in his view a usurper. Although Charles was a Catholic, not all his Jacobite supporters were, but they did believe a Stuart on the throne would give them relief from the austere Presbyterian form of Protestantism imposed on the Church of Scotland by William. So they supported Charles, but despite big initial successes – the 6000-strong army got as far south as Derby – their cause eventually foundered at the Battle of Culloden, where Charles eschewed the advice of his brilliant general Lord George Murray (a Protestant) and was routed. The backing of the French had waned after a 1744 invasion fleet was scattered by a storm. After hiding in the Highlands, Charles eventually escaped back to the Continent, had many affairs and died in 1788.



### BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS:

**The Sleepy Shepherd** by Stephen Cottrell, SPCK, £5.24

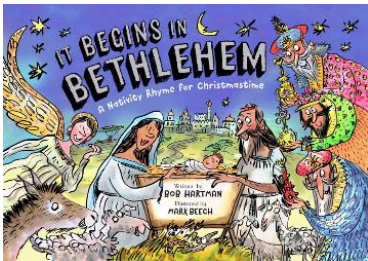
The Sleepy Shepherd is so dozy that he completely misses the visit of the angels and the chance to greet the Christ-child in Bethlehem. But one crucial night, years later, he makes an important decision – to be a real shepherd to a man whose friends have all fallen asleep. Children will enjoy this heart-warming, timeless story.



### BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS:

**It begins in Bethlehem** by Bob Hartman, Bible Society, £2.00

These entertaining rhymes will make it easy for you to share the message of Christmas with children in your family, church and community.



## Mistletoe

*We continue our occasional series on different common flowers by Kirsty Steele, a retired teacher and active church organist. Artwork by Jean Valdar*



This time of year you can see all sorts of traditions played out with regard to Christmas decorations. Strict adherents use holly, ivy and of course, mistletoe. While holly and ivy are to be found in gardens and hedgerows, mistletoe usually only appears in greengrocers' shops, or high in a tree well out of reach.

Mistletoe is *hemiparasitic*, meaning that although its leaves enable it to feed itself through photosynthesis, its roots invade the host tree or shrub to extract water and other nutrients. Its favourite host trees are apple, lime, hawthorn, poplar or oak and it normally hangs as a large globe, tantalisingly high and totally visible once winter arrives and it is the only green left on the tree. There are some spectacular examples in Windsor Great Park, clearly visible from the path on the opposite side of the River Thames.

We all know about the almost translucent white berries, fleshy and sticky, which form in the forks of mistletoe's many branches. While they are toxic to humans, they are attractive to birds. When birds have enjoyed the juicy flesh, they wipe the remaining seeds off their beaks onto the nearest branch [somewhat like small children wiping sticky hands on any surface close by – mummy's face or clothes?]. With luck the seed remains stuck to the bark and solves mistletoe's problem of reproduction.

In Greek mythology, mistletoe gave access to the Underworld. Romans thought it represented Peace, Love and Understanding and perhaps that is how it has sidled into our Christmas celebrations. The earliest documentary evidence for kissing under mistletoe dates from the sixteenth century. Some people think a berry should be removed after each kiss. Given the small size of pieces generally available these days, perhaps that is a practice not to be pursued!



### BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS:

#### 25 Crafts for Christmas

by Christina Goodings and Samantha Meredith, Bible Society £5.99

Here is a craft for every day of Advent, or just to keep your children entertained in the run up to Christmas. You can make decorations, your own Christmas cards, and a variety of gift boxes and trimmings. Suitable for age 3-7 years.



### Santa Mail

Children can once again write a letter to Father Christmas and receive a response from the big man himself with a little help from Royal Mail. However, please ensure that the name and address of the child is included in the letter. **This year the last date letters can be posted to Father Christmas is Friday, December 11, 2020.**

A stamp will be required to ensure delivery to Santa, but no return fee or stamp is required for a response. The price of a first class stamp is currently 76p and a second class stamp is 65p.



## He gave us eyes to see them: St Kevin of Glendalough and the blackbird



*The Revd Michael Burgess concludes his series on animals and birds as seen in art and scripture... this month he considers a 13th century painting by Gerald of Wales.*

During this year we have explored the beauty and wonder of our world in the rich variety of all creatures great and small. In the months of lockdown and restrictions, many of us have used the time to look afresh at the world of Nature and have learnt to value it once again.

When we look at the life of the 6th century Irish hermit saint, Kevin of Glendalough, we see someone who had that special relationship with the birds and animals. An otter, the wolf and a wild boar were his co-hermits. We are told that during Lent as he was kneeling in prayer in his cell, he held his arm out of the window. A blackbird mistook the arm for the branch of a tree and built its nest in the saint's hand. The saint waited until the eggs were laid and hatched and the fledglings had flown.

One of the earliest depictions of this story is a marginal drawing in *The History of Ireland* by Gerald of Wales in the early 13th century and now in the British Library. He visited Ireland several times and was entranced by the marvels he saw and the tales he heard. To accompany the story of St Kevin, an unknown artist drew the saint sat in his cell, cradling the blackbird gently in his left hand. Seamus Heaney captured the story in a poem in which he wondered if the saint was self-forgetful in all those months or perhaps in agony. The poet praises St Kevin because he sought no reward, but offered time and patience to care for this sign of new life.

So much has happened to us during this year for good and ill, and we wonder what the new year will bring. Perhaps St Kevin can inspire us to journey with faith and hope, and to travel through the months ahead with a renewed concern for the created order around. The Gaelic name Kevin means loved. Like him, we pray that we will love and cherish this planet, and care for the wonder and beauty of birds like the blackbird and all the animals. Then we can rejoice with him in the wonder of Creation that displays the handiwork of God the Creator.



## Church of England launches resources on God's generosity

The Church of England's Giving Team has produced a new series of week-long resources (Sunday to Sunday) to encourage people to live generously. It hoped that parishes will use them to organise their own Generosity Week, at a time suitable for them.

The material includes eight daily podcast reflections based on generosity in the Bible. A verse of scripture is followed by a reflection by a range of contributors that include Bishop Rose Hudson-Wilkin and Bishop Guli Francis-Dehqani.

Bishop Francis-Dehqani says: "The best generosity comes not from those who live a miserly existence, but from those whose enjoyment of the good things of life brims over into a desire to share their blessings with others."





- Change your expectations this Christmas. Don't waste time lamenting what should have been. Instead, try and enjoy whatever is possible this year.
- Make a list. Include sending cards, buying presents and organising food for the big day. Having a lists helps keep you in control of your life.
- Set a reduced budget this year. With a pandemic raging, this no time to take on Christmas debt. If you can't pay for it this month, probably best not to buy it.
- Exercise each day – it releases happiness-inducing serotonin. That will help you to keep calm and positive over the festive period.
- Don't overindulge. Too much alcohol and rich food won't improve your life.
- Keep calm and keep kind – urge your family members to try and avoid any flare up of family tensions. If you need to cry, cry, but then, keep on keeping on.
- Remember those everyday essentials: batteries for new toys, toilet paper, milk, paper towel. Those things you never think about – until they are gone.
- Entertain the kids: plan ahead various films, games and whatever it takes to give them a memorable Christmas.
- Make the most of Zoom this year with far-flung relatives and friends.
- Most of all, include God in your Christmas! This is His Son's birthday – include Bible readings and carols in your family routine over the festive period.



### Bishops warn of a 'divided nation'

The Government should give more financial aid to our poorest communities, as they are suffering disproportionately from the pandemic. Otherwise, it runs the risk in a rise of "disillusion and unrest".

So warns the Archbishop of York and the Bishops of Manchester and Leeds.

In a recent article jointly published in the Yorkshire Post, the bishops warn of the "terrible double whammy" of poverty and exposure to coronavirus, because "those in more deprived communities, urban and rural, are also most likely to be living in smaller and more cramped homes."



*Dr Ruth M Bancewicz, is Church Engagement Director at The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge.  
Ruth writes on the positive relationship between Science and Christian faith*

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

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

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

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

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

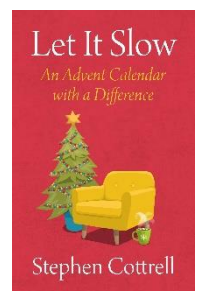
I think it makes perfect sense that if God was going to enter His own creation and take on the form of one of His own creatures, it should be marked by a very significant physical event.



#### **BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS:**

**Let It Slow** by Stephen Cottrell, CHP, £6.99

Christmas is one of the most joyful times of year, and it can also be one of the most stressful. This understanding and uplifting book offers another way to approach Christmas, and to discover how its joys and promises can restore our lives, not add to their burdens.





## It's "Sock Season"

# Roggie Dog



There is something about the beginning of the Autumn/Winter season that I really love, not the leaves falling off the trees – although it is easier to see the birds – no - it is “sock season”! The time of year when even Mummy thinks that going out in just sandals is a bit too much and reverts to shoes and boots.



Shoes and boots mean “socks” – and there is nothing better than pinching Mummy socks and helping her put them on and pulling them off again. I have the teeth for the job! Now you must not try this at home – taking your socks off with your teeth – NO, no – this is purely a task for a little lad like me – low to the ground and a love of toes.



Of course the beauty of this is that whenever Mummy wants to find some socks to put on they are rarely in pairs, although at the beginning of the season she sits me on the bed in the spare room and says “Roggie, sort this lot” but I prefer to snuggle up and have a little rest.

Just so you know – I have hidden the other red one in my play box downstairs, as for the matching one to the purple even I have no idea where to look, we only appear to have three blue socks and there is a yellow one that has disappeared.



I do have a pair x2 socks of my own – think Mummy has put them away with my winter coats and jumpers – they are designed to



keep my feet warm when it is freezing outside. So far I have avoided being seen in public with them on and needless to say I pull them off too but who knows if it is a cold and snowy winter I may need them.

Keep your toes warm and dry.







*Nigel Beeton writes: 'Sometimes Christmas can be a frustrating time. This year I fear may be worse than most, stressful and difficult. But maybe we need to get our frustrations into perspective.'*

## **Christmas Frustration????**

*By Nigel Beeton*

I said to God, upon my knees  
"O Lord, I am so cross!  
"That gift I sent to Aunt Denise  
"Within the post is lost!  
"That tree I bought for forty pounds  
"(Well, just a penny less)  
"Its needles lie upon the ground  
"It looks a total mess!"

"I know," said God, "I understand,  
"I sent my Son, you know.  
"He came to Earth, just as I'd planned  
"Two thousand years ago  
"Was born within a stable bare –  
"The cattle heard Him cry  
"He spoke of love, men didn't care  
"They led Him out to die."

"No gift was given with such love  
"No higher price was paid.  
"He left His throne of light above  
"For sin His life to trade.  
"But even after all these years  
"This gift you men eschew,  
"So Christmas is a time of tears  
"For Me, as well as you."



## **Christmas Cards from Eden.co.uk**

Cards that offer a faith-friendly way of bringing people closer to Christ this Christmas.  
Every order will help raise money for life-changing Christian charities.

<https://www.eden.co.uk/christmas-cards/>



*Nigel Beeton writes: 'Now those that know me know that I'm an old fashioned sort of a bloke. I completely understand those who give to charity instead of buying Christmas cards, and I don't really mind getting electronic messages, but I really do appreciate a good old-fashioned Christmas card. I put them up in my hall, and I often stand and admire them, and think of those who sent them long after an e-mail has disappeared below the special offers and the dozens of e-mails that come in each day.'*

## Let's hear it for the Christmas card!

*By Nigel Beeton*

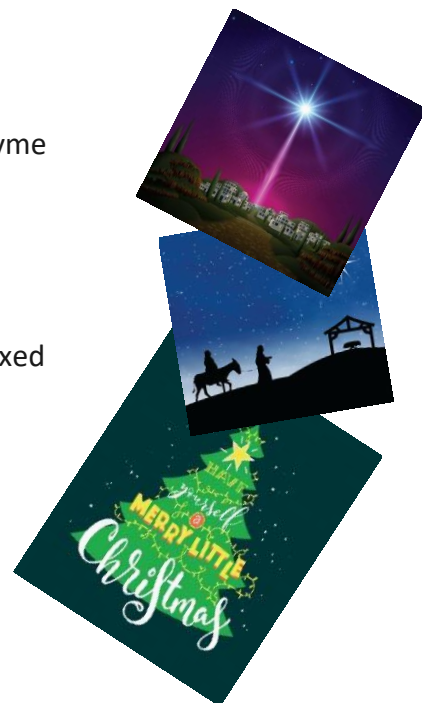
A folded piece of Christmas cheer  
Came through the post today!  
I love it when those cards appear  
I love the things they say!

The trouble that good people take  
Is really, really kind –  
Some people even sit and make  
A card for me to find!

And so I think that it is fine  
To see your kind regard  
I can admire this Christmas time  
Your real Christmas card!

And at this busy Christmas time  
I'm always glad to see  
The Christmas scene or Christmas rhyme  
That you have sent to me.

And in our virtual world of text  
And pictures on a screen  
These bits and bytes leave me perplexed  
If you know what I mean?



## Christmas to Me

*By Colin Hammacott*

Christmas to me is nativity  
And the sound of carol-singing;  
But to others it is revelry  
And the sound of shop tills ringing.

Christmas to me is the Magi  
Who put all of their faith in a star,  
And in search of the little Christ child  
They willingly travelled so far.

So what will YOU see this Christmas?  
Will you think of that baby so small?  
And recognise that the love of God  
Came to earth that first Christmas of all?

Christmas to me is shepherds  
On a hillside attending their sheep;  
And the sound of angelic voices  
Over a town bathed in sleep.

Christmas to me is worship  
Giving thanks for the Saviour's birth;  
But to many of the folk I know  
Christmas has no real worth.



**Tis also the season to be merry ... Roggie Dog**







Hello again...

It is supposed to be “the season to be merry” but even as a little doggie I wonder what my third Christmas will be like.

The previous two years have seen Mummy missing in action for hours on end, days on end – well most of December really - with carol concerts and services down at the big church. Although I have attended a few with her, for the most part I have been “home alone” just waiting for Mummy to come home. I like to join in - I like to meet my human and doggie friends – just like you enjoy meeting your friends – but looking at Mummy’s diary there aren’t any of the usual events in there, so guess this year Mummy will be spending more time at home with me.

I will not be sat on my desk this year – no pats and cuddles or dog treats as people walk past. Still, there is no point in being sad, we must all do our bit – but dressing up may be a step too far!

Mummy thought it would be nice to have a new Christmas outfit – although I hoped upon hope that I would not be expected to walk the streets in this one. I feared strange looks, people laughing at me – but then it is approaching Christmas and we all need something to make us smile, especially this year and perhaps it would be quite nice to be “Santa Dog” giving out gifts. However.... There is looking the part and looking silly...



I just don’t think this is quite “me” – I was so excited when we unpacked the box, wagging my little tail - then horrified when Mummy put it on me – tail no longer wagging at all. I love being a photographic model but - I stood on the floor unable to move. Days earlier I had been measured from head to tail, Mummy had studied the size chart carefully, but something had gone wrong - I couldn’t get the poppers to fasten. I tried it out as a sleep suit – but I could hardly breathe. I wagged my tail a little bit, but gave Mummy one of those looks – “you must be joking” and was so happy when I noticed that she was printing off a returns slip!



Of course I am looking forward to Christmas – I’m ready to help put up more lights....

Lots of love and licks

Roggie Dog





## A Quiz on 2020

David Pickup

- Q1. Job applications from weirdos and misfits were invited from people to work at which place in London?
- Q2. Which famous actor who died this year is associated with the phrase "I am Spartacus?"
- Q3. In February the Church of England advised against the practice of 'intinction' – what is it?
- Q4. In a world "where you can be anything, be \_\_\_\_\_" – what, wrote actress Caroline Flack on Instagram in December 2019?
- Q5. What were we supposed to do in March while singing the National Anthem or Happy Birthday twice?
- Q6. This year was a leap year. What do we call other years?
- Q7. Which village in the Peak District is associated with self-isolation during a previous plague?
- Q8. How long, literally, is quarantine?
- Q9. Why did President Macron visit Britain on 18<sup>th</sup> July? What other Anglo-French anniversary could he have remembered but for some reason it was not mentioned?
- Q10. How many countries launched space rockets to Mars this year?
- Q11. Who, in their resignation letter in August, on Twitter posted, "I have championed our work, built our relationships and celebrated the diversity of our staff... and will always be an ambassador for the UK and the new Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office" after a four year career in Downing Street which had included scraps with a neighbour? He was going to spend more time with a family in the country.
- Q12. Which day is the furthest away from Christmas Day?
- Q13. What was the Battle of the Tennis Court and why was it remembered in August?
- Q14. The BBC banned singing the lyrics from which song from the Last night of the Proms, because it had a link in their mind with slavery and colonialism?
- Q15. This year marked the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the voyage of the What event did they start which led to a public holiday?



## Wordsearch for December 2020

## Silent Night

This much-loved carol comes from Austria, where it was first sung as *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht* on Christmas Eve, 1818. It was written by Father Joseph Mohr, a young priest at St Nicholas parish church, in the village of Oberndorf bei Salzburg. As Christmas 1818 approached, he asked the local schoolmaster, Franz Xaver Gruber, to compose a melody for his carol. Gruber was organist in the nearby village of Arnsdorf, and so was happy to oblige. On Christmas Eve they presented the carol to the church during the midnight mass. The carol went on to become loved world-wide; and the version sung by Bing Crosby is the third best-selling single of all time.

Silent	Night	Loved	Carol
Austria	First	Sung	Stille
Nacht	Heilige	Christmas	Eve
Father	Joseph	Mohr	Young
Priest	Organist	Midnight	Mass
Melody	Single	Bing	Version

S	I	I	O	E	V	E	T	E	T	A	L
T	H	I	R	D	G	H	N	L	F	Y	E
T	V	O	G	G	G	I	E	G	A	O	L
I	E	I	A	I	N	E	L	N	T	U	O
P	R	S	N	I	J	U	I	I	H	N	R
B	S	D	I	H	R	O	S	S	E	G	A
S	I	E	S	A	M	T	S	I	R	H	C
M	O	V	T	F	I	T	S	E	I	R	P
C	N	O	S	L	I	R	H	U	P	E	T





**Poinsettias** are cheery plants that are widely grown indoors over Christmas for their brightly coloured bracts. Give your plant enough sun, warmth, and water and your poinsettia will provide perfect seasonal colour. They are often disposed of once they start to fade, but with a little care, you can keep them all year and the bracts will colour up again the following year, but it isn't an easy process! Place your plant near a sunny window – they are tropical so appreciate as much direct sun light as possible. A loose, well-drained peat based potting compost is best. Water whenever the surface feels dry to the touch, water until it drains out of the bottom, but don't let the plant stand in water (it rots the roots).

## Sudoku

5		7				3		6
			4	9	6			
						2	1	
2		5		8	9	6		
4	8		2		7		9	5
		1	3	4		7		2
	2	8						
			7	3	8			
3		9				8		7

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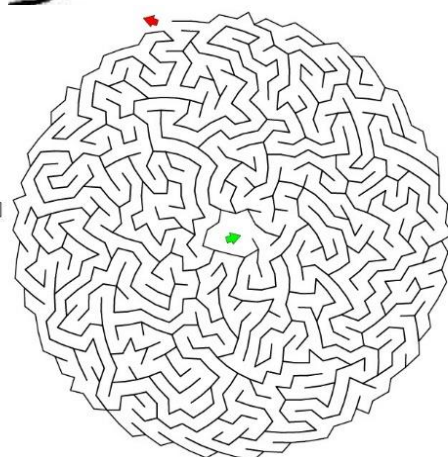
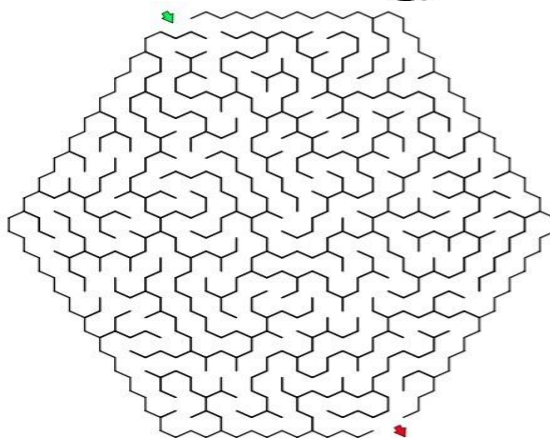
6	1			7				
				4	5			2
			8					3
	7		8			9		
		2				6		
		3		2		8		
4				5				
1		6	3					
				4			9	7

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			8	2				
						3		7
	4				3	8	5	
		6	3	5		7		2
5				1				3
1		3		7	9	5		
	2	9	5				6	
6		5						
				9	2			

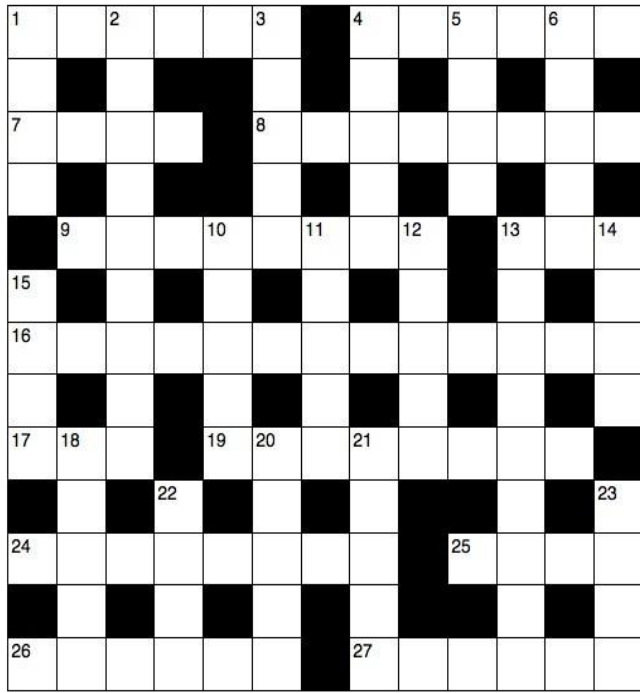


## Maze Puzzles





## Crossword 1 Clues



### Across

- 1 Rely (Psalm 62:7) (6)
- 4 'He stretches out the heavens like a — , and spreads them out like a tent to live in' (Isaiah 40:22) (6)
- 7 What the dove carried the olive leaf in, when it returned to Noah's ark (Genesis 8:11) (4)
- 8 Annoy (1 Samuel 1:6) (8)
- 9 Judah's last king, who ended his days as a blind prisoner in Babylon (Jeremiah 52:11) (8)
- 13 'They all — and were satisfied' (Luke 9:17) (3)
- 16 Eliphaz the Temanite was one; so was Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite (Job 2:11; 16:2) (4,9)
- 17 National Association of Evangelicals (of the USA) (1,1,1)
- 19 Popular song for New Year's Eve, Auld — — (4,4)

24 Able dock (anag.) (8)

25 The number of stones David chose for his confrontation with Goliath (1 Samuel 17:40) (4)

26 Elgar's best-known 'Variations' (6)

27 Soak (Isaiah 16:9) (6)

### Down

1 Money owing (Deuteronomy 15:3) (4)

2 Conciliatory (Titus 3:2) (9)

3 'Do this, whenever you — it, in remembrance of me' (1 Corinthians 11:25) (5)

4 A group assisting in the governance of the Roman Catholic Church (5)

5 One of the gifts Joseph's brothers took with them on their second journey to Egypt (Genesis 43:11) (4)

6 'Reach out your hand and — — into my side. Stop doubting and believe' (John 20:27) (3,2)

10 Be outstandingly good (2 Corinthians 8:7) (5)

11 'What — — that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?' (Psalm 8:4) (2,3)

12 Horse's feet (Judges 5:22) (5)

13 Notice (Deuteronomy 17:4) (9)

14 Comes between 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah (4)

15 One of Israel's northern towns conquered by Ben-Hadad (1 Kings 15:20) (4)

18 Narnia's Lion (5)

20 One of the two rivers in which Naaman would have preferred to wash (2 Kings 5:12) (5)

21 Avarice—one of the evils that come from inside people (Mark 7:22) (5)

22 Knight Grand Cross of St Michael and St George (1,1,1,1)

23 Jacob's first wife (Genesis 29:23) (4)



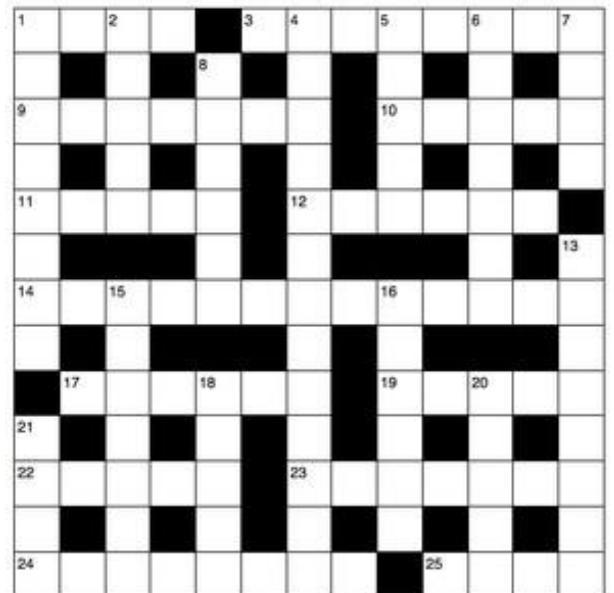
## Crossword 2 Clues

### Across

- 1 'How long will you — your face from me?' (Psalm 13:1) (4)
- 3 'Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the — he bore' (Hebrews 13:13) (8)
- 9 Posh sin (anag.) (Romans 8:15) (7)
- 10 Solemn pledges (Matthew 5:33) (5)
- 11 Italian term for full orchestra (5)
- 12 'For he who avenges blood remembers; he does not — the cry of the afflicted' (Psalm 9:12) (6)
- 14 Prescience (1 Peter 1:2) (13)
- 17 Where a Hindu holy man lives (6)
- 19 'If he found any... who belonged to the Way, whether — women, he might take them as prisoners' (Acts 9:3) (3,2)
- 22 Fragrance (2 Corinthians 2:15) (5)
- 23 Vine hen (anag.) (Jonah 1:2) (7)
- 24 Precious stone decorating the twelfth foundation of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:20) (8)
- 25 'Will you keep to the old path that evil men have — ?' (Job 22:15) (4)

### Down

- 1 'Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with — — ' (Numbers 20:11) (3,5)
- 2 'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, " — — murder"' (Matthew 5:21) (2,3)
- 4 One of Paul's many hardships endured as a servant of God (2 Corinthians 6:5) (13)
- 5 'We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, — inwardly' (Romans 8:23) (5)
- 6 Changed (Daniel 6:8) (7)
- 7 'My yoke is — and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:30) (4)
- 8 Recoil (Revelation 12:11) (6)
- 13 'O Lord, you have — me and you know me' (Psalm 139:1) (8)
- 15 ' — to me the joy of your salvation' (Psalm 51:12) (7)
- 16 Express sorrow (Isaiah 16:7) (6)
- 18 'Then he said to Thomas, " — out your hand and put it into my side"' (John 20:27) (5)
- 20 'God has said, " — will I leave you; — will I forsake you"' (Hebrews 13:5) (5)
- 21 Son of Onam and brother of Shammai (1 Chronicles 2:28) (4)



## Junior Wordsearch



f	q	z	u	c	s	d	k	w	v	o	n	o
j	f	t	m	d	n	r	t	g	o	d	c	l
p	r	o	p	h	e	t	h	a	f	r	v	f
p	r	a	y	i	n	g	n	s	f	i	l	q
l	w	a	i	t	i	n	g	a	e	s	j	d
a	i	t	i	b	a	b	y	v	r	r	e	n
l	n	f	t	s	m	u	y	i	i	a	s	b
n	s	j	e	v	e	r	y	o	n	e	u	o
d	i	o	m	t	a	d	h	u	g	l	s	p
a	d	s	p	m	i	u	p	r	s	d	i	e
n	e	e	l	f	a	m	i	l	y	c	t	a
n	u	p	e	o	p	l	e	a	d	e	r	c
a	j	h	p	i	n	c	o	u	p	l	e	e

Temple  
praised  
peace  
Jesus  
Anna  
Israel

baby  
offerings  
inside  
everyone  
people  
Saviour

Anna  
prophet  
couple  
God  
Joseph  
leader

family  
lifetime  
Mary  
praying  
waiting  
world

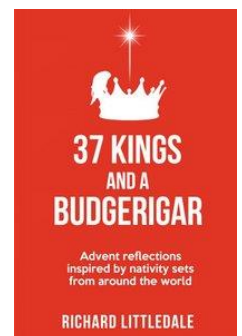


## BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS:

### 37 Kings and a Budgerigar by Richard Littledale, Authentic, £7.99

For many of us, putting out a crib set is one of our treasured Christmas traditions. But what do these scenes really tell us about the original Christmas story?

Richard Littledale, a regular contributor to Daily Service and Sunday Worship on BBC Radio 4, shares reflections, Bible readings and prayers for each day of Advent, based on his own personal collection of nativity sets from around the world. Just like unexpectedly finding a figure of a budgerigar in one of his nativity sets, this accessible devotional will surprise you anew as you see the familiar nativity story with fresh eyes.





# The First Christmas

JESUS WAS BORN ABOUT 2,000 YEARS AGO IN THE SMALL TOWN OF BETHLEHEM, NEAR JERUSALEM.



AN ANGEL HAD TOLD MARY SHE WOULD HAVE VERY SPECIAL BABY



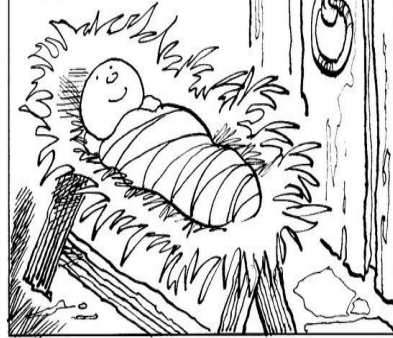
MARY AND JOSEPH MADE THE LONG JOURNEY FROM NAZARETH TO BETHLEHEM. THEY HAD BEEN ORDERED THERE BY THE CENSUS.



BUT THE TOWN WAS FULL... THE ONLY SHELTER THEY COULD FIND WAS A STABLE...



...WHICH IS WHERE THE BABY JESUS WAS BORN.



SHEPHERDS IN FIELDS NEARBY RACED TO SEE THE BABY. AN ANGEL HAD TOLD THEM WHERE JESUS HAS BEEN BORN.



## Bible Bite

A short story from the Bible

It can be read in the Bible in Luke 2 verses 22-38

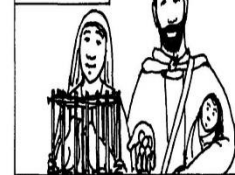
God promised the Jews that when times were bad, He would send a leader to save them. He told Simeon it would happen in his lifetime.

God told Simeon to go to the Temple.



He saw a couple with a baby.

Mary and Joseph had come to give their offerings for their first-born, Jesus, and for child birth.



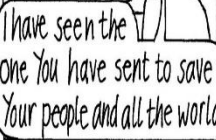
Simeon held Jesus and praised God.



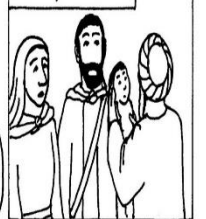
I can now die in peace because you have kept your promise.



I have seen the one you have sent to save your people and all the world!



Mary and Joseph were amazed! Simeon blessed them, but said...



This child will show what people are really like inside and this will mean pain for you as well.



Anna the prophet was also in the Temple.

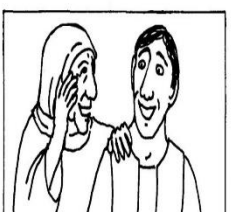


Her family was from the north of Israel and she was very old.



She spent every day praying in the Temple.

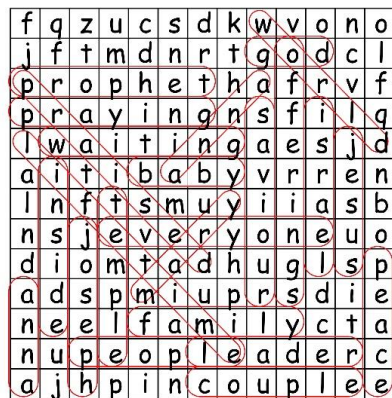
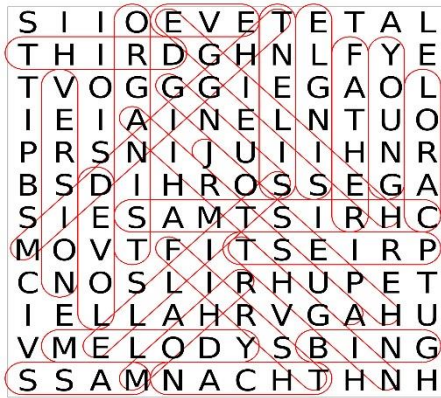
When she saw Jesus she praised God.



Anna spoke about Jesus to everyone who was waiting for God's Saviour.







3	5	1	8	2	7	6	9	4
9	6	8	1	4	5	3	2	7
2	4	7	9	6	3	8	5	1
4	9	6	3	5	8	7	1	2
5	7	2	4	1	6	9	8	3
1	8	3	2	7	9	5	4	6
7	2	9	5	3	1	4	6	8
6	1	5	7	8	4	2	3	9
8	3	4	6	9	2	1	7	5

6	1	5	2	7	3	8	4	9
3	8	9	1	6	4	5	7	2
7	2	4	5	8	9	1	6	3
5	7	1	8	3	6	9	2	4
8	4	2	7	9	5	6	3	1
9	6	3	4	1	2	7	8	5
4	3	7	9	5	8	2	1	6
1	9	6	3	2	7	4	5	8
2	5	8	6	4	1	3	9	7

5	9	7	8	1	2	3	4	6
1	3	2	4	9	6	5	7	8
8	4	6	5	7	3	2	1	9
2	7	5	1	8	9	6	3	4
4	8	3	2	6	7	1	9	5
9	6	1	3	4	5	7	8	2
7	2	8	9	5	1	4	6	3
6	5	4	7	3	8	9	2	1
3	1	9	6	2	4	8	5	7



A quiz for 2000

- A1. Job applications from weirdos and misfits were invited from people to work at 10 Downing Street.
- A2. Kirk Douglas was the famous actor who died this year and is associated with the phrase "I am Spartacus".
- A3. In February the Church of England advised against the practice of 'intinction' – which is dipping the communion wafer in wine.
- A4. In a world "where you can be anything, be *kind*" wrote actress Caroline Flack on Instagram in December 2019.
- A5. We were supposed to wash our hands in March while singing the National Anthem or Happy Birthday twice.
- A6. This year was a leap year. We call other years common years.
- A7. Eyam is the village in the peak district is associated with self-isolation during a previous plague.
- A8. Quarantine is forty days long, literally, the word derives from the Italian expression quaranta giorni.
- A9. President Macron visited Britain on 18<sup>th</sup> July to commemorate De Gaulle's broadcast to France in 1940. It was also the anniversary of the battle of Waterloo.
- A10. The United States, Europe, Russia and China have all launched space rockets to Mars this year.
- A11. The Foreign Office cat, Palmerston, in his resignation letter in August on Twitter posted, "I have championed our work, built our relationships and celebrated the diversity of our staff... and will always be an ambassador for the UK and the new Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office" after a four year career in Downing Street which had included scraps with a neighbour. He was going to spend more time with a family in the country.
- A12. Boxing Day is the day furthest away from Christmas Day (because you cannot travel backwards in time – think about it)
- A13. The Battle of the Tennis Court was part of the Burma Campaign during the Second World War. It was remembered in August as part of VJ commemorations.
- A14. The BBC banned singing the lyrics from which Rule Britannia from the Last night of the Proms because it had a link in their mind with slavery and colonialism. The decision was since reviewed.
- A15. This year marked the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the voyage of the Their celebration of harvest gave rise to Thanksgiving.



### **Build on a Strong Foundation - March 5th 2021**

This is the theme of the 2021 service, written by the Christian women of Vanuatu - located in the South Pacific Ocean. While the islands are of great beauty with all the colours of a tropical paradise, they are also vulnerable to frequent tropical storms, earthquakes, tsunamis and active volcanoes. So women, men and children of all ages are called to "Build on a Strong Foundation" and live in unity, love and peace in the context of ethnic and cultural diversity like Vanuatu and so many other places around the world. It's a very appropriate message for our current situation, isn't it?

Our World Day of Prayer in Stockport may not look like it has done in the past, and we don't yet have a venue, we may even not be able to have a live service. So watch out for updates, which may be at the last minute, as we try to adapt to the rules of the moment, whatever they are. In the last resort, a virtual service may have to suffice, but if you would like a service booklet at the time, please ask me, and we will get one to you.

The national World Day of Prayer Committee have been holding Preparation Days via Zoom - so I and a couple of Committee members joined a meeting in Herne Bay, which is pretty amazing, and there were women from all over the country attending. They are concerned that if no live services are held they will be in a similar position to the British Legion, and rather short on funding. So if you are able to give what you would have given if you had attended a service that would be fabulous. But let's wait till we know if we can have a live service, then decide what to do.

For those who are unfamiliar with it, the organisation is international and inter-church, and the Day of Prayer is celebrated in over 170 countries. It begins in Samoa, and prayer in many languages travels throughout the world. Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas before finishing in American Samoa some 39 hours later.

If you get the chance, please google [wwdp.org.uk](http://wwdp.org.uk) to find out more about Vanuatu and the WDP movement.

Catriona Smith  
Secretary, Stockport Centre Committee

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