

Dear friends,

WISHING YOU ALL A VERY HAPPY CHRISTMAS!

The week before Christmas has already seen one Christingle, and two carol services. Next Sunday sees another two Christingle services, a Christmas Eve Carol service and Midnight Mass. While I do my best to cover as much as I can, obviously it is impossible to cover three churches without the sterling assistance of our many dedicated retired priests and in recognition of their dedication we held a thank you party in St. Peter's church hall last Friday. It was a joyful occasion catered for superbly by Mandy Butcher and is our small way of saying thank you for another year's solid work.

Of course, the Christmas Spirit is always tempered by the funerals and terminal illnesses that continue unabated, reminding one that the rich tapestry of life and death goes on around us always and my heart goes out to anyone and everyone that is suffering at this time of year. As I write this, I am keeping my eye on the clock as I remember that another funeral ensues today and more grief-stricken people will have a pall thrown over any celebrations that they may have been anticipating.

Christmas Eve and Christmas day services.

All Saints East Budleigh : No service on Christmas eve at 9.30am but instead have their very popular annual 6pm Carol service in the evening. Normal 9.30 Christmas day service (Monday) at 9.30am.

St. Michael's Otterton: Have their normal 11am service on Christmas eve followed by their Christingle service at 3pm. They have an 11am service on Christmas day.

St. Peter's Budleigh Salterton: Have their 8am and 10am services in the morning followed by their Christingle service at 5pm followed by Midnight Mass at 11pm.

They have their normal 8am and 10am services on Christmas day.

Sunday 24th December – Christmas Eve

The reverend Colin Randall will preside at the two morning services and Canon Mike Williams will preside at St. Michael's (Note: No morning service at All Saints). Reverend Jean Burrows will preside at both Christingle services at St. Michael's and St. Peter's at 3pm and 5pm respectively. I will preside at the 6pm Carol service at All Saints at 6pm and Midnight Mass at St. Peter's at 11pm. The morning readings are for Advent 4 and our Advent candle is lit for the Virgin Mary.

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16. David decides to build a Temple to God in Jerusalem. But apparently God is not keen, saying that he never once asked for a house of stone and has happily travelled in tents with his people freely. (The Temple got built eventually by Solomon). Despite God's apparent reservations he doesn't stop the process, but he does indeed promise David that his line will have an eternal dimension which is why every effort of the early church was made to underline that Jesus was of the house of David and that he, Jesus is the eternal king of the Davidic line.

Romans 16: 25-27. On the face of it, a strange reading to pick at this time of year. No narrative, no weary shepherds, no angelic choirs, no searching Magi. The end of Romans though, speaks of the whole event of Christmas being a mystery that has been revealed. A mystery that can speak to everyone no matter whether they are highly educated or can barely read and write. Mystery transcends logic and speaks to a part of us that lays deep within our souls.

Luke 1: 26-38. In contrast to our epistle today, this is a story that has beguiled and perplexed people for over two thousand years. A story once dubbed "the greatest story ever told". It also spawned a devotion to Mary that protestant churches dismiss at their peril. Mary holds the key to the Christian declaration that God is near, close to every living thing. Mary provides the model of the Christian attitude towards God of submission and devotion and doing his will. A willingness to do his will come what may. Sometimes called the first charismatic – Mary is full of the Spirit and gives birth to Jesus. Mary was the God bearer and had the title "Mother of God" bestowed on her by the church, a title hotly contested down the centuries, but if we say that, in faith, Jesus is God incarnate the title is entirely appropriate. People confuse the term "God" which we habitually use to describe the whole Trinity with God as "Father". Of course, Mary cannot be the Mother of the Father but certainly of his Son. Jesus is after all Emmanuel which means "God is with us".

Thought for Today

Having liturgical celebrations that celebrate various aspects of the Christian faith throughout the year are essential on a purely practical and human level of explaining and handing on our faith and speaks to the human appetite for repetition, constancy and the need to celebrate. We have all spent our entire lifetimes celebrating his birth, life, death and resurrection (and everything in-between) every year of our lives. But while we often need reminding, Christians actually are asked to be living every aspect of our faith every day. Every day we celebrate his nearness to us

(Christmas) his death (He is like every single one of us) that he has conquered death (Easter) and sent the Spirit to animate inspire and strengthen us (Pentecost). Christianity wants all these aspects of the mystery of God's self-revelation to become a part of us, every day. Most people when you mention Christmas immediately think about all the glitz and commerciality of the occasion – the decorations, the cards, the Turkey, the presents and I love those things too. But as a Christian I also know that, just like the saying about a dog, Jesus is not just for Christmas. There used to be a popular song "I wish it could be Christmas every day" (by Wizard I think?), well to a Christian it is! And Easter and Pentecost as well.

The Prayer for Today is by Pope John XXIII

O Sweet Child of Bethlehem

O sweet Child of Bethlehem, grant that we may share with all our hearts in this profound mystery of Christmas. Put into the hearts of men and women this peace for which they sometimes seek so desperately and which you alone can give to them. Help them to know one another better, and to live as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. Reveal to them also your beauty, holiness, and purity. Awaken in their hearts love and gratitude for your infinite goodness. Join them all together in your love. And give us your heavenly peace. Amen.

Love and peace,
Martin