

Dear friends,

We tried to prepare for Christmas as thoroughly as we could in one great effort so over two days we sent 60 cards, bought and wrapped all the presents we could think of, sent the ones that needed to be sent, and put up two Christmas trees in our front room (Louise insists on a real tree and I insist on my little artificial tree that holds so many memories). You'd think I'd sleep sounder after getting all that done but on Saturday night I didn't get a wink of sleep so at the 8am communion service I felt like death warmed up, but rallied for the 10am. I was desperate to stay awake and not nap during the afternoon and by the time of Choral Evensong I surprised myself by being relatively chirpy. All the services were well attended and the quality great – the choir at Evenson continues to amaze me. I hear that there was a bumper congregation at St. Michael's also not just because there was a baptism, the increase in numbers there over the last few months is quite a success story. A couple of glasses of wine, an early night, and a sound sleep later I feel like a new man. That same Saturday evening the friends of All Saints hosted a concert by the University Chapel choir, which was tremendously popular and raised over £1000 for the church building so well done everybody.

Covid regulations in church

Over 200 clergy and laity attended a zoom webinar on Tuesday and basically, we are doing everything in accordance with the national rules as we are so there is no need to change anything for our normal church services. Congregations, as you know, have to wear masks (unless exempt) but can remove them if they wish to sing hymns. Refreshments after the services continue as normal, including mince pies and mulled wine after carol concerts. Communion in one kind will continue. So apart from being told to wear masks, just use your own common sense and do what seems right to you which includes staying at home if you are very anxious.

19th December – Advent 4.

I am presiding at All Saints and St. Michael's at the 9.30 and 11am services respectively and Reverend Colin Randall is presiding at St. Peter's. Reverend Margaret Scrivener is presiding at the 4pm Carol service at St. Michael's and

I will then be presiding at the [6pm](#) Carol service at St. Peter's. This week our Advent candle commemorates the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Micah 5: 2-5. In this prophecy a future king will emerge from the same town that gave rise to King David. The fact that Bethlehem was small and insignificant compared to Jerusalem and David himself was the youngest and probably smallest of his brothers, says to us that God works in ways that are not our ways. Verse three is reminiscent of Isaiah 7:14 that the future shepherd King will be born naturally of a woman.

Hebrews 10: 5-10. The author takes it for granted that a sacrifice is necessary. It is just that the Temple sacrifices were valid but ineffective. The reason is twofold. The high priest was a sinner as well as the people he represented and the sin offering of an animal could not take away human sin. Jesus was both a sinless high priest and a perfect offering all in the same person.

Luke 1: 39-55. In this famous extract from Luke, the importance of Elizabeth is clear, but it is also clear that she is subordinate to Mary just as John is subordinate to Jesus. The Magnificat – verses 46-55 – is modelled on Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2) and it offers comfort to all that are lowly or poor and know their dependence on God and harsh warnings for the wealthy and powerful so there is hard political edge to this song beloved of South American liberation theologians especially.

This lovely poem was forwarded to me by Di Bagshaw

O Radix

All of us sprung from one deep-hidden seed,

Rose from a root invisible to all.

We knew the virtues once of every weed,

But, severed from the roots of ritual,

We surf the surface of a wide-screen world

And find no virtue in the virtual.

We shrivel on the edges of a wood

Whose heart we once inhabited in love,
Now we have need of you, forgotten Root
The stock and stem of every living thing
Whom once we worshiped in the sacred grove,
For now is winter, now is withering
Unless we let you root us deep within,
Under the ground of being, graft us in.

Malcolm Guite

Christingle services cancelled.

It became increasingly obvious that the Christingle services were causing so much anxiety because of the massive numbers of children involved that the best and obvious thing to do was cancel them for this year. It goes against all my instincts to do so, but perhaps discretion is the better part of valour in this case. The schools and all relevant people who would have been organising these services (including our Archdeacon who was presiding at St. Peter's) have been informed.

Thought for the day

There has been an kind of sea change in British society induced by the pandemic over the past two years as a new enthusiasm for authoritarianism has taken root in Western Governments and a new appetite to be told what to do amongst the people. We have watched as the definition of freedom of the individual as an "inalienable human right" has changed to being whatever freedom Governments decides to grant you at any given time.

Who could have imagined just two years ago that the Government would have been able to tell you by law whether you could leave the house or not, whether you can visit a dying relative or not, whether you could touch them, how many people you could socialise with, how much exercise you could have, how many people were allowed at a funeral, whether you were allowed to leave the country or not and which countries you could legally travel to, to name just a few rules?

We used to pity people who lived behind the iron curtain who had to endure the kind of restrictions on their freedom that we are now accepting as inevitable and necessary and might even be a permanent fixture moving into the future. In such a scenario how does one read and understand Jesus when he says “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:2). What kind of freedom did he mean?

Jesus was of course talking about spiritual rather than political or societal freedom. The people he was addressing in the first century were all suffering under a foreign occupying dictatorship so knew all about restrictions on their freedom to live their lives as they wanted, but He still promised them “freedom” if they accepted the truth. So what is truth? (Pilate’s famous question put to Jesus). Truth is Jesus Christ and believing His presentation of the nature and purposes of God. Jesus said “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14: 6) Jesus says that about himself as a true revelation of God. Knowing the trinitarian God is the truth we need to inhabit and when we do we are set free. But set free from what? Set free from being a slave to sin, free from the fear of death, free to know you are a child of God and that our Father loves you, despite your many flaws, and forgives you when you fall. No matter what physical privations we may be experiencing today, in our hearts and minds we can be free spiritually.

The Prayer for Today is a prayer for all those who are imprisoned both physically and spiritually. You can be imprisoned by your fear, anxieties, upbringing and expectations as well as being behind physical bars. This prayer is from the organisation called Pax Christi (The peace of Christ)

**Lord, open our eyes
To the sufferings of our imprisoned brothers and sisters
So that, by our understanding and love,
We may bring them your peace and joy.
You came to set us free.
May your light shine on the captives,
Relieve their suffering,
And enable us all to grow toward true freedom
In justice and harmony**

Love and peace,
Martin