

Dear friends,

If you had to choreograph an opening “first service after lockdown” it couldn’t have been better choreographed than the service at All Saints East Budleigh on Sunday. So many people(!) and all in a great mood – so glad to be back - having missed church these past few weeks. The atmosphere was one of peace and resolve and at the end of the service I emerged into a clear blue sky and dazzling sunshine. On days like this you remember what it was that brought you into ministry in the first place!

Sunday 13th December – Advent three.

The third candle is lit honouring the role of John the Baptist in the Christian revelation. I will be presiding at the 8am and 10am at St. Peter’s and Rev. Karen Young will preside at the 9.30 at All Saints and the 11am at St. Michael’s.

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11. This piece of Isaiah is quoted by Jesus in the synagogue (Luke 4:18-19) ensuring that it is one of the best-known pieces of old testament prophesy, which he uses to refer to himself. In its original context it is addressed to Jewish returnees from exile in Jerusalem between about 540 and 520 BC. and is the prophet convincing his listeners of his credentials as a true prophet of God. The people were free but impoverished but the soaring rhetoric powerfully expresses hope for the future.

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24. A piece demanding that our whole lives be oriented towards God – a life not compartmentalised into religious and secular bits but where every decision and every moment have a relationship to the reality of God. But the “good” and the “evil” are not quantified, leaving the discernment of God’s will to be tried and tested (not automatically accepted) within the community. The church is called to be a community of moral discernment to test the various voices that claim to speak God’s will, to see if there is divine guidance for the confusing decisions of life.

John 1: 6-8, 19-28. The one “who you do not know” is coming after me, challenges the church to acknowledge its presumptuous assumption that we do know who Jesus is. Portrayed as an innocuous infant, dispenser of salvation, revolutionary leader, spiritual guru or a dozen other ways, all of them grasps just one facet of Jesus’ identity. They are all subsumed within the understanding of Jesus as the incarnation of the eternal word – the Christ.

Psalm 121

Before I left my Deanery in Kent to train for ministry I was encouraged to make a full sacramental confession to my area Dean, mentor and friend Fr. Reg. Humphriss. I made my confession – nowadays called the “sacrament of reconciliation” and was encouraged to meditate on psalm 121. A so-called “Psalm of ascents” because Jews on pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple had to ascend to it because Jerusalem is quite a high city. So, it has held a special significance for me ever since as a source of comfort and assurance of the permanent help of God in times of need and crisis.

Psalm 121

Assurance of God’s Protection A Song of Ascents.

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—
 from where will my help come?
- 2 My help comes from the Lord,
 who made heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot be moved;
 he who keeps you will not slumber.
- 4 He who keeps Israel
 will neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 The Lord is your keeper;
 the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
- 6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
 nor the moon by night.
- 7 The Lord will keep you from all evil;
 he will keep your life.
- 8 The Lord will keep
 your going out and your coming in
 from this time on and forevermore.

The Lighter side! With a covid flavour Courtesy of
Jill in Gainford

*What is Dominic Cummings’ favourite Christmas song?

I’m driving home for Christmas

*Production at Santa’s workshop has ceased

The workforce had to Elf isolate

*Why didn't Mary and Joseph make it to Bethlehem?

All Virgin flights were cancelled

*Why are Santa's reindeer allowed to travel on Christmas Eve?

They have herd immunity

*Why is it best to think of 2020 as a pantomime performance?

Because eventually, it's behind you

Thought for the day

I think that the virgin birth is one area that gets in the way of many more people accepting the birth of Jesus as a true factual event because the story bears all the hallmarks of a fairy tale. I am also aware of many practising Christians who are troubled by the virgin birth or who skirt round the issue. I know many other Christians who deem it absolutely necessary to believe it completely to be considered a "real" Christian. I, like many others have questions that we are reluctant to voice too loudly so when I received this email from Fr. Richard Rohr this morning offering this fresh interpretation it clarified and helped me enormously because it offered a new perspective. One that doesn't dismiss the orthodox view but offers a relevant fresh perspective on what the virgin birth actually means in terms of a human response to God. It certainly helped me, so I judge that it will also help others and so I provide the gist of the communication here.

"Why, from the earliest centuries, have Christian people been so excited about Mary? What's happening in the depths of our soul when we hear her story? Surely it must be about more than the miracle of the virgin birth. As Benedictine oblate, author, and poet Kathleen Norris shares, Mary's "virginity" has less to do with biology than with her stance towards God and life itself. It is only when we stop idolizing the illusion of our control over the events of life and recognize our poverty that we become virgin in the sense that Thomas Merton means. . . . We all need to be told that God loves us, and the mystery of the Annunciation reveals an aspect of that love. But it also suggests that our response to this love is critical. Mary's "How can this be?" is a simpler response than Zechariah's, and also more profound. She does not lose her voice but finds it. Like any of the prophets, she asserts herself before God, saying, "Here am I." . . . Mary proceeds—as we must do in life—making her commitment without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead. I treasure the story because it forces me to ask: When the mystery of God's love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? . . . Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say something new, a "yes" that will change me forever? If Jesus is the representative of the total givenness of God to creation, then perhaps Mary is the representative of

humanity, showing us how the gift is received. And I believe that is why we love Mary. She's a stand in for all of us. When we can say, like her, "Let it be," then we're truly ready for Christmas."

The prayer for Today is by Martin Jacques after a particularly trying day.

God help me!

Love and peace,
Martin

Please note my new email address is vicar@rmcommunity.co.uk