

Dear friends,

New Year's Eve was a beautiful day – cold but sunny with clear blue skies – so we walked one of our favourite walks via Otterton, the coast path and Brandy head Bothy, and back up the river Otter. Just over six miles which felt good and told me I wasn't as out of shape as I'd feared.

Saturday 28th March at 6.30pm – A date for your diary

The night before my last service in the villages and a week before my last service at St. Peter's we will be holding a farewell bash in St. Peter's church. It will be like the talent night we staged for my 20th anniversary of my ordination together with a meal like at my Sabbatical presentation night. Musical pieces, comedy skits, jokes....anything really. Just good fun together with good food supplied by Mandy.

Sunday 11th January – The Baptism of Christ

I will preside at both services at St. Peter's and also at Choral evensong at 6pm. Archdeacon Trevor Jones will preside at All Saints and St. Michael's at 9.30am and 11am respectively.

Isaiah 42: 1-9. Isaiah's prophecies about the future promised Messiah are all applied to Christ by Christians. His gently applied strength and mission to bring wholeness and healing to the poor and oppressed are embodied in the life, healing miracles, wisdom and teaching.

Acts 10: 34-43. Peter preaches that there is no partiality in the house of Cornelius, a gentile, because Jesus is "Lord of all". He points out that all this started after his Baptism in the Jordan where he was anointed with the Holy Spirit and declared Son of God. He further declares that all the prophets testified about Him and that Jesus himself chose the Apostles as witnesses and commanded them to preach the good news.

Matthew 3: 13-17. The baptism of Jesus is reported first in Mark's gospel and in all essential terms they are identical - the baptism and the Holy Spirit alighting on Jesus in the form of a dove. They differ however in a small but significant way. In Mark's (and Luke's) version the announcement seems to be for Jesus' ears only. "You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased" – a bit like an inner voice – whereas in Matthew, it is "This is my Son etc" and seems more akin to a public announcement. That difference apart, both affirm that Jesus is the anointed one.

The thought for Today

My first funeral of 2026 came in on New Year's Eve. Now unlike my first wedding which I cannot remember, I do remember my first ever funeral because of the unusual circumstances. In 2002 in Cernavoda (an industrial town in Romania) I was working in a children's AIDS hospice. I had been sent out there by my theological college and was not ordained. A little boy called Logan had died of AIDS that day and his body had been washed, coins in his eyes and jaw tied shut by the other children. It was a first dead body I had ever encountered and out of morbid curiosity I couldn't help touching him. Little did I know that later that day I'd be conducting his funeral. The Orthodox priest who was supposed to be doing it hadn't turned up, so I was asked to

conduct the funeral. I hurriedly searched for anything I could follow and found an old ASB (Remember them?). I found a funeral liturgy in it and when Logan turned up in an open coffin, I started the service which was simultaneously translated by a Hospice administrator into Romanian. This was my baptism of fire, you might say. Remember I wasn't ordained, just an ordinand at seminary. This brings to mind another "first" which happened in Cernavoda in my time there. The first Mass I ever deaconed was not in an Anglican church but in the Catholic church. Fr. Solomon, speaking through translators invited me to serve with him at Mass. I was so nervous, in a full church, but felt so blessed by the priest and the people there. I asked Fr. Solomon whether I should take communion as a non-Catholic. He wanted me to but said it was down to my own conscience so of course I did. Incidentally I also remember attending a Baptist church where I was refused communion by them because I wasn't a repentant Christian! Experiences like these are seared into my brain and have deeply affected my beliefs ever since. At that time, I wasn't to know that a few years later I would apply for and get the job of priest of the church of the Resurrection in Bucharest. I did so because as you might imagine, by then, Romania had got under my skin in a big way.

The Prayer for Today is purported to be by Reinhold Niebuhr (he of the serenity prayer fame). It is so simple and is appropriate for the beginning of the new year.

**Lord
Forgive what I have been,
Bless what I am,
And direct what I shall be.
Amen.**

Love and peace,
Martin