

Dear friends,

We had two Christmas dinners on Saturday – lunch provided by the Lions club in Budleigh in the Public Hall and the other one was the St. Peter's candlelight Supper. It was beginning to resemble the famous vicar of Dibley sketch. Of course we couldn't miss the final of Strictly when we finally got home which made it a late night. So getting up at six O'clock as I do to prepare for the 8am communion came quite hard. After a couple of well attended and uplifting services (It is always good to have well over 100 people on a Sunday morning) and to have a few for the under 16 column in our service book (Thanks Stacey) we were treated to another superb meal by good friends of ours. So a few pounds heavier and a tired but satisfied man can now contemplate the Christmas plethora of carols and readings with fresh vigour.

Sunday 22nd December – 4th of Advent.

Robert Charles will be presiding at both services at St. Peter's and Colin Randall will preside at All Saints and St. Michael's at 9.30 and 11am respectively. Christmas services start this weekend so Jean Burrows will preside at Christingle at All Saints at 3pm in the afternoon and I will be presiding at two carol services in the afternoon – 4pm at St. Michael's and 6pm at St. Peter's – so Christmas is getting very much underway. The 4th candle on the advent wreath commemorates the Virgin Mary – whose "yes" to God was the start of the Christmas story.

Micah 5: 2-5a. Bethlehem, was where King David came from and it was prophesied that this would also be the location of the birth of the once and future king – the Messiah. So it was important that Jesus' birth would be located in Bethlehem – to accord with prophesy. For me, the name of the location speaks louder. Bethlehem, in Hebrew means "the house of bread". Jesus, the bread of life was born in the house of bread.

Hebrews 10: 5-10. A classic repudiation of the valid motives but ineffective practice behind the old "day of atonement" animal sacrifice. This was replaced by the valid and effective perfect "once for all" sacrifice of Jesus. The high priest was a blemished human being but Jesus is presented as an unblemished self-sacrifice doing the will of God. The author accepts completely that sacrifice is necessary to deal with sin and that only a sinless human offering would suffice.

Luke 1: 39-55. In this classic story, John is presented as subordinate to Jesus even in the womb. From the lips of Mary we get the classic "Magnificat" which is modelled on the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2) and in fact carries a hard prophetic edge promising redemption for all those who are downtrodden and lacking in power and promising a comeuppance for all those in places of privilege and power.

Thought for the Day.

I know that Marian devotion confuses many people and frightens others because they imagine that it obscures worship properly due to her son Jesus. But Mary is venerated rather than worshipped. She is the very start of the Christian story for without her “yes” to God, Christianity wouldn’t have taken place. So, her “yes” is the model for all subsequent Christian submission to the will of God. Her purity, alongside her love of her son and being there with him at the very beginning and very end of his life is also a model for all Discipleship. Mary was also present at Pentecost when the Spirit fell on all the young church. As I’ve tried to explain before also, the famous icons of Mary and the infant Jesus stand as a Metaphor for the relationship between God and humanity that turns our pre-conceived notions on their head. Mary representing humanity holds a dependent loving child (representing God) on her lap. She is often directing her gaze directly towards you the viewer and pointing towards her child – saying effectively – This is our God. Some protestants balk at the notion of asking Mary for her intercession. This is an old conflict, but I see nothing different in asking Mary or anyone else for their prayers and being asked to pray for someone by a friend or member of the congregation – you are simply asking someone else for their prayers. We routinely stand for the Magnificat (and some make the sign of the cross) because Mary heralds the universal meaning of the incarnation in highlighting God’s mercy and that his reign will be the great leveller between the mighty and the powerless. In common with our past Archbishop Rowan Williams, I am caused mightily to “Ponder these things”.

The Prayer for Today is by Joyce Huggett the Exeter born writer and broadcaster who died in 2018.

Lord Jesus,

This Christmas, as we sing the familiar carols, hear the familiar readings and ponder on familiar mysteries, give to us the gift of pure worship – that gift that Mary had of attributing to you your true worth, your full value, your inestimable greatness.

Teach us to be reverent yet teach us how to express the love that burns within our hearts as we think of your goodness to us. – that you have come to be our light in darkness, our hope in despair, our strength in weakness, our shelter in the storm – yes, and our eternal saviour.

Love and peace,
Martin