

Dear friends,

We've made six trips to the tip, advertised items on the village WhatsApp group and given away larger items to grateful recipients and while there is still a long way to go we have made significant headway in reducing our "surplus to requirements" items. A lot more has been sorted into items for jumble sale, bookaid and council collection. It is actually an exercise that is making us feel good – de-cluttering and identifying what we do want to actually keep. We have some boxes that haven't been touched in nearly eight years since we moved from Tynemouth so it's a good bet that we don't really need the stuff in them.

The beginning of the year has seen a significant number of deaths of people we know, the latest being Jackie Clemo, who I used to take communion to every Tuesday for years. That was a bit of a shock. Louise and I considered Jackie a friend and we used to go round often on our day off. I had visited Jackie on the Tuesday, but she was unwell and asleep, so I didn't want to wake her (even though I called out her name a couple of times) and she died later that day. For all the recently deceased, for Jackie, for Jan, for Doris and for Peter let me just pray.

Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord and let light perpetual shine upon them.

Sunday 25th January – 3rd of Epiphany

Robert Charles will preside at both services at St. Peter's and I will preside at All Saints and St. Michael's at 9.30 and 11am respectively.

Isaiah 9: 1-4. The geographic location (quoted in Matthew's gospel today) refers to an area that had been conquered by the Assyrians in 724BC, thus ending the Northern kingdom of Israel. This produced a multinational and multireligious area known as Galilee of the nations (or gentiles). The Day of Midian recalls those battles Israel fought against enemies with far greater numbers – that they couldn't have expected to win – without God's help. The battle of Midian is recorded in judges 7: 15-23 when Gideon won with a group of only 300 men.

1 Corinthians 1: 10-18. The wholly fragmented nature of the modern Christian church would probably make Paul's blood boil. We are all prone to factionalism however, and whether, traditionalist, evangelical, liberal, feminist – it is hard to remember the overall Lordship of Christ and subvert our private vociferous differences to his cause. Even when we occasionally unite for a joint service we very quickly retreat to our denominational silos and even within the denomination itself we have our favourite preachers and characters. Jesus should transcend these differences, but human nature is a stubborn beast

Matthew 4: 12-23. Capernaum is by the sea of Galilee, and this lake provides the backdrop to much of the ministry of Jesus. In contrast to John's gospel Andrew and Peter were called by Jesus as He walked along the shoreline, and they were fishermen. They "immediately" followed Jesus, an acted parable in itself – there is no time for looking back or being half-hearted in true discipleship.

Thought for Today

Apparently, last Monday was “Blue Monday” or so I read. For some reason, it is supposed to be the most depressing day of the year, probably I’m guessing, having something to do with post-Christmas blues together with gloomy weather I suppose. In the church though, forever delightfully out of step with modern culture we are still celebrating the Christmas season which doesn’t end until Candlemas – otherwise known as the presentation of Christ in the Temple, so we have a couple of weeks to go yet. Then we go through an interim period before the truly austere and reflective season of Lent. The very human impulse to provide light and shade into our liturgical seasons is so the contrast between the seasons of penitence and the seasons of celebration is maximised. That is why Christmas is preceded by Advent and Easter is preceded by Lent. Light and shade, happiness and sadness, feast and famine – you interpret one in the light of the other. When you lose that distinctiveness, life becomes flatter and have less meaning, more boring I’d say, to be blunt. It is hard work to maintain a high level of “happiness” all the time. In fact I’d say it was pretty much impossible, like living in a permanent advert where everyone is a perky happy and smiley. Happiness, I have discovered in life, is fleeting and cannot be maintained for long. Contentment is the key to a balanced and healthy life. You cannot be happy all the time, but you can aim to be content with the hand that God has given you, through both happy and sad times. And there will be sad times and that is natural. Sadness cannot be avoided but it can be indulged. In fact, you can get a bit addicted to a certain kind of sadness (as a song I can’t quite remember puts it). A healthy spiritual life is an important part of your overall health and wellbeing. The liturgy of the church knows this well and reflects our human propensities.

The Prayer for Today is a lovely prayer by St. Jerome, best known for translating the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin. He was a hermit and ascetic, but this prayer is very human and warm.

**O Lord,
Show your mercy to me and gladden my heart.
I am like the man on the way to Jericho
Who was overtaken by robbers,
Wounded and left for dead.
O Good Samaritan, come to my aid.
I am like the sheep who went astray.
O Good shepherd seek me out
And bring me home in accordance with your will.
Let me dwell in your house all the days of my life
And praise you for ever and ever
With those who are there.
Amen.**

Love and peace,
Martin