

Dear friends,

Happy Christmas!

As I start to write this, I'm looking forward to four services over two days including Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve followed by the 8am. service on the very next morning on Christmas day. They all have their special atmosphere of course and the traditional Christmas Eve Carol service at All Saints East Budleigh is always packed to the gunnels and fairly relaxed so I'm looking forward to that one as well.

This is also a special time of year for Louise and I as we prepare to jet off to south East Asia for three months just after Christmas so a lot of mixed emotions and checking last minute details. There will be one more email, the last of 2024 next Wednesday 1st January.

I presided at two carol services yesterday evening and it was good to relax at the annual choir party after the one at St. Peter's. Otterton's one attracted well over a hundred people and the Benefice choir sang very well. Whatever is going on at the highest levels of the Church of England doesn't seem to be affecting us much on the ground in East Devon.

Wednesday 25th December – Christmas Day. The last white candle on our Advent wreath represents the Christ.

I will be presiding at the carol service at All Saints, midnight Mass at St. Peter's and both services on Christmas morning at St. Peter's. On Christmas Day, Chris Cant will preside at All Saints at 9.30am and Archdeacon Trevor Jones will preside at St. Michael's at 11am. There are so many reading options for midnight and Christmas day that it was difficult to choose which one to highlight, so I've plumped for the ones I'll be using on Christmas day at St. Peter's.

Isaiah 9: 2-7. This passage is an example of how a passage can be so relevant at different stages of history. Originally, this may have been composed for the coronation of king Hezekiah where a new king was symbolically "born" and was a sign of renewed vision, peace, hope and joy. It was probably used at different coronation services as well, each one heralding a new and fresh age. Christians took this sign of new hope, often dashed in the reality of many new kings of Israel as being finally fulfilled in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Titus 2: 11-14. The Grace of God has appeared "bringing salvation to all" so the vision is universal but it also has the function of forming a dedicated "Israel-like" community of believers for whom there is an ethical dimension to how we respond. The term Saviour, used extensively in the scriptures is also used in the imperial cult to describe Caesar and problems with the translation of verse 13 leaves it very uncertain whether Jesus is being referred to as God (as in our translation) or not.

Luke 2: 1-14 (15-20). Luke sets his narrative of the birth of Jesus not against the political backdrop of the heavy-handed local king Herod but against the background of the Roman Empire. He gives Emperor Octavian his honorific title Augustus (bestowed on him in 27BC) and poets wrote of his peaceful ideals and how his reign would usher in a golden age based in virtue. Great hope was vested in him. Ancient monuments refer to him as "Saviour". So, Luke presents the Roman empire as benign and full of hope rather than a belligerent aggressive bully. But the failed hopes and aspirations vested in Augustus soon turned to dust in the reality of vain, greedy and bloodthirsty emperors. The true contrast here is being

made between the misplaced hopes and dreams placed in secular power and the true hope being offered by a true saviour.

Thought for Today

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the year zero but the word of God was eternal and always intimately involved with the world. This is the central truth and mystery of the Christ event. God was always in the world in an almost hidden but not quite apparent way. You needed eyes to see and ears to hear God's actions and involvement with the world. Jesus was indeed a new thing that we call "incarnation" but he symbolised something that had always been true – that God had since the dawn of creation been present and intimately involved in the world. Jesus was the sign and symbol of what had always been true and continues to be true today. Jesus was a true revelation of the nature and character of God. He had always been vulnerable, always forgiving, always loving, and strangely dependent on humanity to nurture and return his love. We have true freedom to either accept or deny this fresh revelation which is God being true to himself – never forcing himself into someone's life without being invited. That was and is always true. No matter how badly our response to him falls short – God remains in the same place He always occupies -always wanting life in all its fullness for each one of us. That was the same before Jesus was born but became very apparent to Christians (people who accepted who He was – the Messiah) who revelled in this marvellous and mysterious new work of God. God is hidden in plain sight in the world and has been from creation to right now. Creation itself – the pure gift of life - is the greatest sign of his creative love and willingness to create and let people decide for themselves whether they will or can return that love. We can return his love by worshipping him obviously but also by living in the same way that Jesus Christ showed us the way to live, and by seeing that ultimately everything without exception is connected to God (and with each other) in an organic, mysterious way. That is why Jesus taught us that the Golden rule is to love God and Love each other because one is dependent on the other.

The Prayer for Today is by Linda Jones

**God of joy, remind me to rejoice.
Wrapped up in my Christmas gifts,
tied down in my debts,
I have forgotten.
God of peace, remind me of your calm.
In my anxiety
and in my haste,
I have forgotten.
God of all, remind me of the true light of Christmas,
of your gift shared.
In my own wants and in my own needs
I have forgotten.
Wrapped up in my little world,
remind me of your world.
God of joy, remind me to rejoice.
Amen.**

Love and Peace,

Martin

