

Vicar's Letter
Epiphany 2019

Dear Friends

It was Winston Churchill who once said, "All men make mistakes, but only wise men learn from their mistakes. I am always ready to learn although I do not always like being taught". People often think he meant this in relation to the ultimately disastrous (although it is often forgotten that it was almost successful) Dardenelles Campaign in the First World War, for which he was responsible. It wasn't, what he said about that was "Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it", which perhaps makes a similar point.

One great way to illustrate this is to play a game of 'Simon Says', in an assembly, parade service address or with any group willing to have some fun. You know the game, if you say 'Simon says', the children should do what you tell them, but if you don't say 'Simon says', they must ignore whatever you tell them to do. Examples could include standing up, sitting down, running on the spot, stretching up high and curling into a ball, not to mention fold your arms, touch your nose, put your hands together, blink, close your eyes and open your eyes etc.

But if I then ask, 'Who thought that the game was fun?', and then 'Why was it fun?', answers always suggest that the game was fun because it wasn't as easy as the children had thought, and it made them listen and think. It wouldn't have been as much fun if everyone had got it right every time. What would it have been like if everyone had followed every instruction perfectly? Indeed if everyone was perfect at Simon Says, there wouldn't really be a game. Instead, it would just be a lot of people doing exactly the same thing at the same time!

The way we live life is just the same game, it is our imperfections that make life fun and interesting. Life would not be as interesting if everyone was the same and if everybody was perfect. None of us are perfect, so we can always improve, learn and get better. Even if we find it difficult, learning and improving helps us to grow.

In fact if we really want to become good at Simon Says, we can practise, and the same is true of work, sport, art or anything else in life. Sometimes, we get things wrong in a game or in life: we do things that we shouldn't or we are selfish. However, we can practise at being better people, just as we can practise a game. Sometimes, we may need some help but when things go wrong, we shouldn't be too hard on others, or, which is sometimes harder, on ourselves. We can always try to do better next time.

Some people think that believing in God should make us perfect, or at least the will to try to be perfect human beings who never do anything wrong, never make mistakes, never doubt. Yet others think that if we go to Church and are

less than perfect then we are in some way hypocritical. This school of thought actually took root for a while in parts of the early Church before later being widely discarded as the Pelagian Heresy (named after the British monk Pelagius who thought that being made in God's image, humans were essentially perfect and so it was the duty of Christians to effectively defend themselves, block out, all the evil and sin which all came from outside of them in the world around them).

Against this argued St Augustine, who taught what I think we all know to be true of ourselves: that we are not perfect but a mixture of good and bad impulses and intentions. Augustine called this 'original sin' or 'fallen humanity', as expressed poetically in the story of Adam and Eve. But whatever terminology we use I think we know instinctively that a happy and fulfilling life would not be one which tried to hide from all that is bad in the world and was concerned only in preserving some pure perfection from being polluted or in some way corrupted by the world. Rather if we accept that we are all part of the world, that we are not and never will be perfect, then we can find the freedom to learn from mistakes, to take risks and face challenges which will not always work, but might sometimes.

So if you have made a New Year's resolution and have in some way fulfilled it less than 100% successfully, think what St Augustine might say, 'you're not that bad, have another go!' Or perhaps more eloquently, "A life spent making mistakes is not only more honourable but more useful than a life spent doing nothing." George Bernard Shaw

Your friend and vicar
David

Vicar's Letter
Michaelmas 2019

Dear Friends

How do you feel if something that they regard as important gets broken or damaged? Sometimes, when something in our life goes wrong, something important to us breaks or someone lets us down, we want to respond by throwing a tantrum, sulking or crying. Sometimes, things can feel very bad! It's natural to feel angry and disappointed when things do not go as we want, or when something breaks or lets us down. Sometimes, we can become angry and disappointed in ourselves if we don't manage to achieve the things we set out to do. In fact, we may find ourselves wishing that we could turn back time and do things differently. But the Bible shows us that there is another way to respond. What if we accepted, embraced and even valued

brokenness? What if we sought to see the good in situations that did not go exactly to plan? What if we decided to accept that not everything, including ourselves, needs to be perfect?

Consider the (admittedly non biblical) Story of the Cracked Pots

A water-bearer in Japan had two large pots, one hung on each end of a pole, which she carried across the back of her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, whereas the other pot was perfect. The uncracked pot always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, whereas the cracked pot arrived only half-full.

This went on every day for two years, with the water-bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to her master's house. The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect for the end for which it was made. But the poor, cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been intended for.

After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the water-bearer one day by the stream. 'I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you,' the cracked pot said.

'Why?' asked the water-bearer. 'What are you ashamed of?'

'I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts,' answered the pot.

The water-bearer felt sorry for the old, cracked pot. In her compassion, she said, 'As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.'

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old, cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it a little. But at the end of the trail, the pot still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, so again, it apologized to the water-bearer for its failure. The water-bearer asked the pot, 'Did you notice that there were flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side?'

The cracked pot looked confused. That is because I have always known about your flaw,' explained the water-bearer. 'I took advantage of your imperfection. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path and every day, as we have walked back from the stream, you have watered the flowers so that they could grow! For two years, I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not have been these beautiful flowers.'

The story makes the point that none of us are perfect. We often make mistakes and things go wrong. In fact, you could say that each of us is broken. But it's the cracks and flaws that we each have that make our lives together so interesting and rewarding. It is from our problems and mistakes that we can learn and grow. But what about objects that get broken? Most of us are fairly attached to our gadgets, or other possessions. When things that we value get broken, how can we respond in a way that doesn't involve anger and frustration? Perhaps we can learn something from an ancient Japanese art form called kintsugi.

Kintsugi is the art of repairing a broken piece of pottery in a way that makes the flaw or the break obvious by highlighting the join with molten gold. In this way, the story of the piece of pottery is celebrated. The brokenness and damage is part of the pot's history and it is not hidden; instead, it is celebrated. When things go wrong, or something important breaks, there is an opportunity to accept it and learn from it. It can become part of our experience and the journey of our lives. It can be a chance to learn from the difficult emotions of disappointment and frustration and to grow into a wiser and more mature human being as a result. So, for people of many faiths, when they experience problems or get things wrong, they turn to God in prayer. Psalm 147.3 tells us that God is close to those who feel broken. Perhaps its only when we pray that we realise that, (for some of us more than others, maybe), we are all, to some extent, cracked pots!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
July 2019

Dear Friends

At the time of writing it is approaching the fiftieth anniversary of the first humans to set foot on a natural surface anywhere other than the earth, which took place on 20th July 1969, as I'm sure you are aware. One of my earliest childhood memories is of watching that landing, with my parents, grandparents and great grandmother, who had been born during the reign of Queen Victoria and who, surely, must belong to one of the generations to have seen most obvious change during their lifetimes. It was very late, Neil Armstrong stepping onto the Moon's surface, in the Sea of Tranquility, at 0256 GMT, nearly 20 minutes after first opening the hatch, so I was very excited to be up. But, if I'm honest, it was all rather a bit dull for me, small grainy pictures not being as remotely interesting to my preschool self as such much more exciting programmes as Thunderbirds, Supercar and Fireball XL5.

Learning more about Apollo 11 though now, of which I'm sure that you have your own memories, I am surprised to learn how much a close run thing it really was. That the landing nearly didn't take place at all, with only 25 seconds' fuel left out of a 13 minute descent, before the abort button would have to be pressed to ensure enough fuel to get back to the Command Module. That it was less than two and a half years since the first Apollo mission ended in disaster, with the fire and loss of all crew before the rocket had even blasted off, on February 21st, 1967 and less than six months since the first manned journey to the moon in Apollo 8, the first time humans had

left earth orbit. That the technology used, famously less than that in the iPhone in my pocket, stretched the available science and manufacturing processes of the time to their very limits and was all being used for the first time; indeed the giant Saturn V Rocket remains to this day by some way the largest and most powerful structure to have ever flown.

Yet, by a huge amount of effort, belief and courage, it happened and through it, though many doubted that it could happen at all, let alone before the end of the 1960's, the challenge accepted by NASA from President Kennedy, the limits of what is possible, seemed to have expanded. Through that enlargement we have a bigger picture, of our world, our place in it and our world's place in the universe; the 'Earth Rising' picture of the earth, taken by Apollo 8, was the first glimpse humans had of everything which both existed or had ever existed in human history, and all, as astronaut Jim Lovell said, from the spacecraft, could be blocked out by his thumb.

Expanding the limits of what seems possible and a resultantly bigger picture are, it seems to me, what faith in God gifts us. It's not that the picture the astronauts brought to us was something new, it had been there all along, or at least for the last few billion years; its just that it was suddenly made visible - like a beam of sunlight piercing a through into a darkened room makes visible the little motes of dust, which had been there all along, but which suddenly shimmer and glisten. So faith in God unlocks for us a view of things which had actually always existed, at least as possibilities, but which we hadn't realised were there. Often not without cost, certainly not without doubt and never without our own willing cooperation and, sometimes, great effort - and often also not without some backsliding - but gradually, life enhancingly and increasingly visibly - faith in God transforms lives; ours if we let him.

Why should this be? Well one answer is that is always ready for us, even if we sometimes feel as if we are waiting to glimpse him. Our view of life is crowded and cluttered by so many things that our horizons are as much obscured as limited. But God always has a clear view of us, holding his hand out to us, knocking on the door of our lives and waiting for us to trust in that hand, that open door, that departure on what might seem a long, difficult and frightening journey. Yet I believe that the journey is unfailingly worth it and that actually, we can come to know that for ourselves, as, in time, our journey reveals to us, lets us see, what we had never seen before, but which was always there.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
June 2019

Dear Friends

To the best of my knowledge, the word "shallow" cannot be said in one word in French ("peu profond"); another difficult word to translate is "cogent" (how different is it from "coherent"?); other delightful English words: flabbergasted; mind-boggling; the countless nouns and verbs describing sight, light, and sounds (glisten, glare, gleam, rustle, etc...) are similarly without a parallel word. Another English word with no one-word French equivalent is "Peck", which translated into French is "Donner de coupe de la bec" or "Attack with the front of the beak."

It seems that in fact every language has words and concepts with no single equivalent in other languages. For example, there is no "logic" nor "romance" in Chinese (ok, there are modern day phonetic translations). Try translating/explaining the Danish "hygge" to English. A friend of mine says that there is no foreign equivalent for the word "stuff" in its "collection of things" sense. According to former US President George W Bush "...the problem with the French is that they don't have a word for entrepreneur." Although, with this in mind we might reflect that neither does Portuguese have the words "bully" or "impeach".

This aspect of translating words popped into my mind this week when I read that Bristol University said that its Dr Gerard Cheshire had "succeeded where countless cryptographers, (including Alan Turing!) linguistics scholars and computer programs have failed" by identifying the language and purpose of a mysterious and apparently coded 15th-century text, the 'Voynich Manuscript. Although the meaning of the volume, held at Yale University, had eluded experts for more than a century, the university said Cheshire had solved the

puzzle in just two weeks “using a combination of lateral thinking and ingenuity”. Cheshire argued Voynich was a therapeutic reference book composed by nuns for Maria of Castile, queen of Aragon, and the sole surviving text written in a lost language called “proto-Romance”. He described his findings as “one of the most important developments to date in Romance linguistics”. Although in the last few days the University has backtracked a little, claiming that this still remains an unproven theory, Dr Cheshire has not, heralding his breakthrough as being even more important than the discovery of the meaning of the manuscript, because, through it, we might have knowledge not just about the language itself, but of the whole ‘Proto Romance’ culture, society and civilisation, of which it is the only (known) survivor.

How we know about a society, an event or a person from the past is necessarily only communicated to us through what it leaves behind and points to; in the case of history this would be things like written documents, art and archaeology. As we look in June towards the great Christian feast of Pentecost however, it seems to me that it is of crucial importance to us in understanding, finding out about and indeed experiencing Easter –in fact I’d go so far as to say that if it weren’t for Pentecost, we wouldn’t even know about Easter!

Consider the backstory. Jesus spent forty days with his disciples, (before they were to be transformed into ‘apostles’ at Pentecost), they were no doubt a bit bereft when he ascended back to his father, but he had to do this if he was not to be limited to their time and place but to be what he was meant to be – feeling perhaps a bit like parents watching their children go off to university!

More than that, seven days after the ascension, the disciples, as they still were, joined thousands of others in Jerusalem at ‘the feast of weeks’, the end of the Passover festival in which the first sheaf of the barley harvest would be offered before God in the temple, anticipating the greater harvest that was to come in the summer. Well on the fiftieth day after Passover (Pentecost comes from the greek word for fifty, ie pent – five), that harvest was begun for the disciples, who were then turned into apostles, by the result of Jesus becoming for all ages; the holy spirit came and as the memory of all Israel celebrated the deliverance from Egyptian bondage, so the apostles could show that multi ethnic jewish population that deliverance from all that enslaves and holds us in bondage is available, and that what God uttered through the prophet Joel had come true,
“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” Acts 2: 16-18

This is why the story of Pentecost is the lens through which we both know about and see the meaning of Easter. It promises that whatever happens to us in life, Jesus is there with us through his holy spirit. It shows that, just as the three thousand souls who were added to the Church on that first Pentecost Sunday were from all corners of the Roman world – just as in fact the population of Rome itself was – so the narrative arc of Acts shows the Easter story being carried out of Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (as they

understood it at the time!). It shows that people knew about Easter because of and through Pentecost. It finally points beyond even that, to a promise of fulfilment of which we can catch wonderful glimpses in the fulfilments that the work of the holy spirit is able to work in us, if only we let it. If the Voynich manuscript is the only lens through which we may see the whole proto Romance culture, then our understanding of Easter is in the same way shown to us through the lens of Pentecost; it might not be able to be understood logically, but there's no end, in the true meaning of the word, to the romance.

Your friend and vicar
David

Vicar's Letter
May 2019

Dear Friends

Maybe because they are traditionally times of family gatherings, Christian festivals, especially Easter and Christmas, sometimes draw up and carry with them some of our deepest family memories. If we are going to remember and miss someone we have loved and lost, we will do it now. As we contemplate the Bible readings of the women bearing spices and wishing they could at least anoint the one they miss, we might also think about the many people who will visit graves and memorial plaques over the easter weekend, 'Renewing flowers, tending the bare earth'. All those 'beautiful useless gestures', all that 'love poured out in silence' is, I believe, somehow gathered together in these three days and sown deep in the ground of God's love, ready for the day when he will make all things new again.

"The love that's poured in silence at old graves
Renewing flowers, tending the bare earth,
Is never lost. In him all love is found
And sown with him, a seed in the rich ground."
To quote a wonderful poem

It's the same motif I think which moves us to decorate the inside of Churches with the signs of renewed life in springtime which flowers represent, the Church being transformed from the bare austerity of plainness in Lent to a wonderfully renewed vibrancy celebrated at easter.

As I was thinking about this transformation, I was reminded of a novel written by the Anglican Author, Susan Hill called 'In the Springtime of Year'. It was written 40 years ago when she was mourning the death of her talented fiancé David Lepine. David was the first organist of the newly built Coventry Cathedral and he died suddenly, of a coronary heart attack, at the age of 43. Susan Hill wrote this novel to express her pain, and it is a moving and intimate tale of the process of grieving. Ruth, the central character mourns the sudden death of her husband Ben who was killed by a falling tree in a freak accident. A year after his death she has started to come to terms with her loss. She goes with Jo, Ben's younger brother, to the village churchyard on Easter morning. Susan Hill writes:

'They had reached the Lych gate. Jo was pointing. She looked...
The churchyard was brilliant as a garden with the patterned flowers, almost every grave was decked out in growing white and blue, pink and butter-yellow, and underneath it all, the watery moss and the vivid grass; it was as though all the people had indeed truly risen and were dancing in the sunshine, there was nothing but rejoicing and release. She walked slowly across the turf to the side of the church and stood, looking towards Ben's grave. It was like a sunburst. She did not need, or want, to go nearer.
Jo touched her arm. 'You see,' he said, his voice full of wonder, 'it did happen. It does. It's true.'
'Did you ever doubt it?'
'Once,' he said carefully, 'one time.'

Susan Hill offers another powerful image of how we can experience this resurrection joy, and it is an image that tells us that such joy is always linked to faith. Resurrection can be doubted, seen only as an imagined happy ending to the pain of grief. Real life, the life of science and economics and hard fact is not like that. People are born, people die, some are happy and successful, for some life is a series of repeated tragedies.

Think of how the liberating power of resurrection is pictured in the Easter stories: Matthew speaks of an earthquake, of an angel descending from heaven and rolling back the stone from the tomb and sitting on it. The guards, the representatives of the governing forces of oppression and violence and death shook, and their power was no more. We are asked through these dramatic pictures to imagine that reality has changed. The order of the world is shaken, heaven and earth are linked, angels come with the dawning of a new day.

But the centre of the story is not the dramatic effects that signal the action of God but rather the fear and joy of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as they run to tell the disciples what they have seen. The centre is in their sudden meeting with Jesus; Jesus who stands in the path, and greets them. 'And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him'. Perhaps, and it is has to be a perhaps, because to see it requires trust and perception, the world has been changed. Faith, trust, will always be accompanied by its darker sister doubt, but it needs sister doubt so that it loses its naivete and doesn't become arrogant, triumphalist or intolerant of other voices.

The centre of the easter story is joy, but it isn't I think the kind of unqualified exclusive inward looking joy which we might feel if we say received a present of something we quite liked or if our favourite football team won a trophy. The centre of the easter joy is a joy which is born out of the experience of pain, loss and sorrow and has somehow found a way through; which acknowledges that joy is not all that there is to life, but that we can find joy in life anyway

"He blesses every love that weeps and grieves
And makes our grief the pangs of a new birth."

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
April 2019

Dear Friends

On 18 March 2107 Frenchman Eric Barone (also known as Le Baron Rouge, or Red Devil), beat his own downhill speed record by topping 141mph on a ski slope in the French resort of Vars. The record tops Barone's previous effort from 2015, which saw him reach 223,3 Km/h (138.75 mph) on the same ski track.

Once a stunt double for actors such as Sylvester Stallone and Jean-Claude Van Damme, Barone has always held a fascination with speed and has been setting bicycle speed records since the early nineties.

56 Year old Barone also holds the record for the fastest speed achieved travelling downhill on a volcano with a prototype bicycle. Set back in 2002, Barone was clocked at a mere 172 kilometres per hour (107 mph) while descending the Cerro Negro volcano in Nicaragua. Moments later, Barone's fork broke away from the frame of his bike causing a shocking crash that you really, really shouldn't watch if you're at all squeamish (but you can if you want to on You Tube!)

"The only thing propelling Eric was gravity", explained his engineer, "so Eric's bike, helmet and latex suit were all designed to minimise air resistance. We made a 3D scan of the bike with Eric sitting on it and then added external 'fairings' to the frame to get an optimal airflow to make him as aerodynamic as possible.

The picture of Le Baron Rouge hurtling by the sheer force of gravity down a snowy mountainside is in marked contrast with another picture which sprang at once to my mind when I first heard about Mssr Barone and his 141.5mph. The story which I thought of, and which might perhaps be one way of thinking about the Easter story as well is one with which you might already be familiar. It's the story of Alfred Wainwright, the Blackburn lad who, in 1930 took the train to Windermere from Blackburn and walked up Orrest Head, the path to

which, you might know, begins just across the road from Windermere railway station. If you do know that path which Wainwright took, you will know that it is almost entirely covered with thick woodland, through which only brief glimpses of the sky, whatever it might be like that day, and even briefer glimpses of the growing panorama of the lakes and mountains around the walk, may be glimpsed. But, on reaching the top, and emerging from the woods, a glorious vista of the whole southern Lake District, springs into view, 'like drawing back a curtain' was how Wainwright described it, and it was to be an experience which transformed his life....but let Alfred tell it in his own words:

'These few hours on Orrest Head cast a spell that changed my life. I was totally transfixed, unable to believe my eyes. I had never seen anything like this. I saw mountain ranges, one after another, the nearer starkly etched, those beyond fading into the blue distance. Rich woodlands, emerald pastures and the shimmering water of the lake below added to a pageant of loveliness, a glorious panorama that held me enthralled. I had seen landscapes of rural beauty pictured in the local art gallery, but here was no painted canvas; this was real. This was truth. God was in his heaven that day and I a humble worshipper.'

Alfred Wainwright left Blackburn and moved to Kendal, where, as Borough Treasurer from 1948 to 1967, he mapped out walks and both wrote and illustrated the books of walks which were to open up his beloved vistas and panoramas for many others over the years, and still do.

So how does this relate to Easter, you might ask, and to Mssr Le Baron? Well, imagine walking through those woods, and knowing that there was a marvellous view somewhere to be seen but only catching brief glimpses. Imagine, eventually, emerging and having your world view transformed. Imagine then being able, with the brave baron, to hurtle through that mountain landscape at a speed that no-one has ever been able to achieve before. That, I suggest, is one way in which we might experience for ourselves the exhilarating, transforming, sometimes frightening picture which is the rolling away of the stone in the Easter story: to allow ourselves to emerge out of whatever tomb we might find ourselves in and see and experience a life so much in contrast with anything we had known before that it changes and transforms our life – just as it did Wainwright's all those years ago. It has been put so marvellously in a poem I know, and much better than I can say that I'll end on this wonderful picture;

Lost in your own dark wood, alone, astray,
You pause, as though some secret were disclosed,
As though some heavy stone were rolled away.

You glimpse the sky above you, wan and grey,
Wide through these shadowed branches interposed,
Wide as an empty tomb on Easter Day.

And then Love calls your name, you hear Him say:

The way is open, death has been deposed,
As though some heavy stone were rolled away,
And you are free at last on Easter Day.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
March 2019

Dear Friends

I know of a lady who lives in a gentrified flat in London who has one large wallspace in her living room which is completely devoid of decoration, indeed, crying out it would seem, for a centrepiece. She doesn't want it filled by a ready framed picture a daffodils, she explains, and she is successful enough to be able to afford to purchase interesting and unique art works. She has been to art fairs and consulted with experts and is aware of "a whole world of beauty and interest arrayed before her". And that, she says, is the problem, and the reason that the wall stays, two years after she moved in, stubbornly blank. She is, she says, "paralysed by choice"; its not that she has no idea what to put on her wall, its that there's too much to choose from!

This seems to be a currently trending phenomena, at least as a First World Problem, and psychologists have dubbed it 'Choice Paralysis'; being

overwhelmed by the range of choices available. The lady's blank wall may show us that the internet has not created this paralysis, but it has meant that more and more of us are experiencing it. I remember queuing outside for what seemed like hours around the walls of the main cinema in the town near to where I grew up to see the Steven Spielberg blockbuster film 'Jaws', along with what seemed like every other child my age in the area. Quite whether the wait was worth it is another matter, what I remember most is that no one thought anything of having to queue, it was taken for granted - there was one big screen showing one film which everyone wanted to see (because if you didn't, how could you join in the conversation in the school playground the next day?). Now it is quite different. I have spent many wasted hours of my life scrolling through the Netflix Homepage (many more than I must have queued up to see 'Jaws') dutifully noting the endless options, many or all of which I could happily watch, and managing, in the end, to watch none! The problem is not, as Bruce Springsteen said "57 channels, and nothin' on", but rather that there are endless channels with way too much on.

Another memory from near the time of my queue to see Jaws is of watching the 1978 Morecambe and Wise Christmas special on BBC1 on Christmas Day 1978. Now I know that this is a memory shared with at least half of you who are reading this letter who were alive and sentient at the time. How do I know this? Because it is estimated that that show was watched by at least 28 million viewers, or roughly half the population of the UK at the time, the greatest number ever for a UK non royal or sporting programme. Again, quite apart from the merits of the show or the act it contained (and opinion is, to my eyes at any rate, surprisingly divided on how well the duo have aged with time), it was the common shared experience that society was much more united by then than it is now, partly because of the plethora of streamed services providing us with such overwhelming choice. Its possible to sit in front of your internet connected TV aware that nearly everything that you might ever want to watch is available to you, (including the 1978 Morecambe and Wise Christmas Special – definitely worth it in my view!). Its possible to be paralysed by that realisation, or at least become aware that the Cultural Blockbuster, the show everyone is watching, the album or song everyone is listening to, belongs in the rather more innocent days of three channels on the TV and one screen at the cinema.

It's not only TV which has this individualising effect. I have access to more music than I could possibly have dreamed of even 20 years ago; whether through Spotify, Napster or one word to Alexa I can summon up in an instant songs which I would have gone on an odyssey (say about 20 years), of searching through record shops, market stalls and record fairs, to find. If I hear, now, a song which I like and don't know what it is, one tap on my mobile brings up not only the name of the song and artist, but the song itself, many videos and a wealth of detail about it, and instantly. I wonder sometimes whether when something becomes easily available or abundant, an ancient part of our brains tells us to value it less. We have perhaps evolved to value what is scarce, say, mammoth meat, and to be rather blasé about what is all around us, say the views of the valley. So precious was the finding of the second hand single record that I had long sought and had now found, that

listening to it became a religious experience; now I can summon up every different version ever put out, and twenty different videos of it at the click of a switch, and instantly.

So where does that leave Jesus' claim that he is 'The Way', 'The Truth' and 'The Life' in the face of such choice? How does the Church look, to most non Church going people (which is almost everyone), when it claims to have, alone, the path to the kind of life that God wants for us, ie eternal? Not only in relation to other religions, but, I suspect, to any thought system, philosophy of life or self help manual readily available (online, of course), this claim looks increasingly out of step with what society has become, and is still becoming. The Church and its teaching risks, in my eyes, looking to most people, at best rather presumptuous in the face of such readily available choice or at worst increasingly irrelevant in the face of so much relativism.

Perhaps one way out of this seeming clash of cultures, and one not appearing to be going into reverse any time soon, is to realise that sometimes a break from having to choose might be exactly what people might want, or at least need without knowing it. It's said that the reason why President Obama only ever wore grey or blue suits when he was President was that he had so many important decisions to make each day that choosing his clothes was one which he did not want to have in addition. Making choices can become wearying and burdensome. I was driving back from taking one of my children to university recently and, faced with choosing which of all the world's music which was all instantly available to me to put on in the car, I did something I haven't done for many years; to avoid the burden of choice, I put the radio on!

Churches, like radios, may be past the time where they provided that 'Cultural Blockbuster' which was shared by everyone – but they are both still here. Just as radio still has a place so too might the local Church be a place of welcome refuge from the morass of choice descending on us as we leave the church door. Rather than try to compete or to ape that cultural relativism which provides such opportunity but also such weariness outside its doors, I believe that we might become not just a refuge, but a place of peace where, once we leave it and step out of the door once more, we might be refreshed and better equipped to make the best choices we can. In this way going into a Church can help us to make the most of the opportunities our world brings and be able to decide for ourselves what we do and where we go in the world around us; to be able to decide and say for ourselves, and with great joy, "Yes, tonight, it's going to be Morecambe and Wise"!

Your Friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
January 2019

Dear Friends

I recently saw a painting done in simple black ink on paper in a style which is immediately recognisable as classic Chinese; simple lines, stylised figures and empty spaces suggesting a rich landscape to the mind. I obviously thought that the valley, trees and people walking in the rain the picture depicts was in some glorious corner of China unknown to me. How wrong I was. On looking at the title to the painting I saw immediately that it was of a place I know very well, and, once I had seen the title, immediately recognised. Its title is "Going to Church in the rain, Wasdale Head, 1937". Wasdale Head, in the Lake District, was painted by the Chinese artist Chiang Yee in the style he had been trained in, and was indeed a master of, in 1937 as part of a tour of the Lake district which produced many other Lake District scenes, but portrayed in the Chinese style of painting and were published in a book entitled 'The Silent Traveller: A Chinese Artist in Lakeland' (1937) and which proved very popular. In fact so popular was the book that Chiang produced many other pictures of Britain, including The Tower of London, The Houses of Parliament and many other well known British landmarks, all done in the Chinese style, which were lapped up by the British public at the time, in fact from 1933 to 1955 while he continued to tour the country. An exhibition of Chiang's work entitled 'A Chinese Artist in the Lake District' was recently held at Low Wood Bay, Windermere.

Anyone looking at Chiang's Chinese style pictures of mid Century Britain sees the scene they are looking at through a particular lens. We might in fact see all art functioning in this way; if someone had taken a photograph, for

example, of Van Gough's windmills, or of L.S. Lowry's scenes of industrial towns, painted in the large part at the same time as Chiang was working, they would not see exactly what was painted on the canvas. Rather the art work represents the reality of the scene depicted and helps us to see it in ways we might not otherwise have appreciated.

Seeing something through a particular lens, or maybe experiencing it too, is perhaps one way that we might consider how we experience God in our lives. Just as Moses experienced God in a burning bush, because the true sight of God would be so overpowering, like looking at the sun through a telescope (not to be recommended!) so we can experience something of God only through the medium of something else; the Bible, Church, prayer, whatever works for you. In fact we can sometimes find ourselves looking at something and realise, like looking at one of Chiang's works, that we are in fact looking at something else, and that something else may actually be God.

Consider for a moment Jesus' answer when he was asked for a picture of God to act as a sign for his work

Luke 11:29-32

As the crowds increased, Jesus said, "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom; and now something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now something greater than Jonah is here.

Now this rather at first sight puzzling response to a perfectly understandable request for some picture or guidance is often skirted over by many for whom the only thing that might stand out might be some memory of the Scottish Football results being read out on Saturday tea times (I still don't really know who 'The Queen of the South' is meant to be!). What on earth did Jesus mean, that the whole of Isreal was going to be swallowed up by a great whale?!! Well, in one sense they were, when not long after Jesus in AD 70 a national rebellion against the Romans resulted in the destruction of the Temple and the end of the Jewish state which the Romans had until then tolerated. But I don't think that this is the only meaning of the phrase 'The Sign of Jonah', or in fact the deepest and most effective. I think instead that the sign Jesus talks of points to something deeply profound in both how God showed himself in the Old Testament, which Jesus was pointing to the truth of, and he himself was to embody, and which in turn we ourselves can know.

Jonah finds himself in darkness (inside a whale of course, but maybe in his own life, for a long time before that), because he runs away from God and from God's will for him. The point of the story is that this darkness –or at least our own location of it - is exactly where we will also find ourselves if we too

run away from God and from what God wants us to do and from what our lives could become if we followed his will for us.

The picture that the Old Testament gives us of God is that this darkness is not where he wants us to be. Indeed not only is it not where he wants us to be but that he'll never leave us there and will come to find us in our own particular darkneses and bring us out, if necessary kicking and screaming! In this way the Old Testament figure of God rescuing us from darkness prefigures the New Testament rescue mission by God which finds its fullest expression in Jesus (just as the Old Testament picture of Jonah in his darkness prefigures our own experience sometimes).

So in this way the darkness in which Jonah finds himself, and in which we sometimes find ourselves too, might in fact end up being creative, redemptive and healing if we can use it, like Jonah did, to re-align ourselves to God's will for us and stop running away from him. Just as Jonah was in quite dramatic fashion spat out of the whale, so we might find ourselves being suddenly brought out of our darkness as soon as we have found God's way too.

The Old Testament shows God as never being content to leave people in the darkness into which their lives have led them through their unwillingness to follow his way and path which, if we do follow it, will lead to fullness of life. On the contrary, he'll cajole, hassle and drag people out if necessary. So God in our own time also will never be content to leave us either in our darkness, but will come and find us, through his son, to find and exit the places which our lives have sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately, led us to – our God is still Jonah's God and he'll never leave us there.

So we can experience the reality of what Jesus is saying, how we come to know God, through not only the lens, as it were of Jesus speaking to people 2,000 years ago, but through the further lens of the story of Jonah, which all of those people would have known, but which was written in fact many hundreds of years before that.

Looking at God through the lens of picture, parable, story, is how the Bible presents God precisely because, like looking at a painting, we can experience the reality it depicts in a much richer, deeper sense than if we were to be handed a boring and restricting set of rules or long paragraphs of description. Sometimes, often because of the lens through which we are looking, we might not at first realise what we are looking at, and that in fact we are often looking at God without realising it. In the same way, you don't have to be an expert in ancient Chinese art to see, in a simple ink and paper sketch done in the Chinese style in 1937, the glories of the Lake District.

Your friend and vicar

David

'Going to church in the rain, Wasdale Head', 1937, ink on paper, reproduced in 'The Silent Traveller: A Chinese Artist in Lakeland' (1937)

Vicar's Letter
December 2018

Dear Friends

Certainly one contender for the title of the 'World's Most Dangerous Bridge' must go to the Russian Siberia Vitim River crossing. The bridge is 15 meters above the icy water. It is in fact an old railway bridge and not only are its planks not attached to sleepers anymore, or indeed held in place by anything at all, it has no sides and is wide enough for only one vehicle to cross at a time, wide enough just about that is. It's readily viewable on google and on you tube, which has a video of a Landrover crossing it, a hair-raising experience even to watch in the comfort of your own home! Watching the video you are bound to ask yourself why on earth anyone would put their vehicle, not to mention their life in such peril – especially as you can see a perfectly good and safe looking road bridge to the bridge's right!

I once had the good fortune to see a spectacular and enormous bridge being built, the Queen Elizabeth Dartford Crossing Bridge on the M25, which now takes southbound traffic, relieving the old Dartford tunnel which until the bridge was opened took all M25 traffic in both directions, now only taking northbound vehicles. I watched, living close by the area at the time in 1990 as the two arms of the bridge became close and nearer to each other the higher they went. I remember the first time driving over the bridge and the exhilarating sense of height and perspective it gives, as a passenger you can

make out central London on a clear day to the right – this in marked contrast to the gloomy drabness of the northbound return journey, where the best thing you can do is to remember to pay the Dart Charge online when you get home within 24 hours, or be hit with the consequential fine, like I have been, often.

Well to my knowledge (and if anyone can prove me wrong I'd be interested to learn) the word 'Bridge' is never mentioned in the Bible. But although the actual word is not mentioned there certainly were bridges as we would understand them, and some quite magnificent ones, in the ancient world. What is more the IDEA of a bridge as something connecting two sides, something reaching out and growing closer, like I saw the Queen Elizabeth Bridge become, is certainly not only mentioned many times in the Bible, but is the absolute central truth in it. Consider just a small collection of Bible verses for a moment;

John 5:24

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

John 3:18-19

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

Psalm 148:1-14

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the Lord! For he commanded and they were created. ...

Exodus 23:5

If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.

Even if we might not expect to rescue too many stranded donkeys these days it not hard to think of modern day equivalents of those who are overburdened, weighed down and as a result are at odds with others. Its even easier to see many situations where a huge gulf is there to be bridged; think of Syria, Palestine itself or indeed our own divided society and you won't go far without seeing many situations where a bridge of one nature or another might come in useful.

Within individual people, indeed within ourselves if we are honest, we can find many examples of divisions which need to be healed, to be bridged. I might be tempted by the new John Lewis Christmas Advert to buy that new skillet

which is made of cast iron and can be transferred directly from the hob to the oven and try out that delicious recipe in Nigella which calls for such an item – indeed I confess that I am!- but its price is literally more than I earned in a week at the time I was living in Kent in 1990, and so the necessity of providing a Christmas Dinner for the family means that Nigella will have to remain unopened, again, alas.

Some divisions within people may be so great, however that at some time it might be felt that no bridge, however magnificent, high or wide will ever be able to reconcile the different warring factions within us. Well the good news, and in case you're thinking that this letter has not been very Christmassy so far (at the time of writing we are only just halfway through November!), the best news in fact is that the central message of Christmas, of the incarnation, is that we have such a bridge offered to us in God's son who, coming to us as one of us as he does in the incarnation literally bridges the divide not just within ourselves but, as it were, between heaven and earth, of which our human divisions are just a pale reflection. The picture of the bridging of earth and heaven is behind many scenes and ideas in the Bible, from Jacob's Ladder to the Ascension. What is meant in such pictures finds its fullness in Jesus, God, incarnate, here on earth, sharing our earthly nature so that we might be able to find ways of sharing, and finding in ourselves, our heavenly nature.

The Cross itself might be seen, in one sense as a bridge, or rather two bridges, intersecting. The one, vertically, reaching down from earth to heaven and providing the access to heavenly things that we could never hope to find or provide ourselves. The other, the horizontal, connecting those events in Palestine 2,000 years ago with our own present day experience of life. The events of the incarnation, the first Christmas, are central to us not only because they occurred once in real time, on earth, 2,000 years ago, but also because they are happening now, again in real time, but in the living reality of our present lives. One way of thinking about where those two arms of the cross intersect is just this living, immediate, present reality of that one central event, and it intersects because its where we meet God, that bridge between heaven and earth.

I often find myself, when confronted by some seemingly insurmountable problem, challenge or difficulty a bit like someone on that dodgy, rickety, shaky old railway bridge, but, wheels inches from the edge, finding another car coming the other way. And then looking up and realising that I don't need to be on it at all, that God has done the hard work for me, that there is a perfectly safe and strong bridge already there just to my side – and that I'd have saved myself the consequential trouble of needing to then reverse to get to it if I'd have just recognised that it was there, and always there, in the first place

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
November 2018

Dear Friends

According to the NHS Website, taping a tennis ball to your pyjamas will stop you from snoring. 'Try taping a tennis ball to the back of your sleepwear,' is one of the simple lifestyle changes you can make to prevent snoring, offered by the NHS website. It stops you from sleeping on your back, when snoring is most likely to occur. I like it: it's simple, cheap and non-surgical. I notice though that there have been several problems noted in the comments section; What, specifically holds the tennis ball in place? 'try surgical tape', offers the wise website, which it assures us sticks perfectly to M&S cotton PJ's, "Hmm, how about those from less exalted retail institutions?", I wonder, whose cotton ratio may not be quite as beneficent.

Or how about those who might sleep, shall we say, without a pyjama top? 'No problem', lays down the website, as the tape is designed to stick to human flesh. Removing it, in the morning or any other time, may be more problematical, especially for the males of the species, or maybe for all – like Jacob (2 Kgs 1:8; 2:23 and Gen 25:25, 27) I am not 'an hairy man', but I can't help thinking that I would be even less so with a daily removal of tape resulting in a totally bare raw strip, 50mm wide, around my midriff!

I decided then, to see what the Bible might offer by way of 'complimentary medicine' to that given by the NHS website. According to the esteemed website 'Jews for Jesus', snoring is "an illustration of the end times". Two nostrils are like 'Aram Naharain' (two words) the town Eliezer getting Reveca from, otherwise known as Nahor which, it is claimed, sounds like the word 'snoring' (???) and which was promised to be destroyed; so obviously, the website lays down, the nose is like the fountain of life which wakes people up in the end times...er, I decided to leave it there!

I was reminded of a story I once heard of a man who went to see his doctor for advice about being cured of snoring. The doctor asked, "Does your snoring disturb your wife?" The patient replied, "Does it disturb my wife? Why it disturbs the entire congregation." Not mine, I hope!!

One thing we can say with certainty about sharing a room or a dorm', or a thin hotel wall, with someone who snores is that at least it proves they are alive – and depending on who they are or perhaps our enforced sleeplessness because of it, we may thank the Lord for that and bless them in their sleep!

Interestingly the Bible has rather a lot more to say about sleep than it does about snoring. In Ephesians, for example, we find that light (religious truth) is described as very powerful as it is able to make dead things living just by shining on them.

"But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."
(Ephesians 5:13-14, ESV).

The interesting thing is that this is no direct quote of any biblical passage, so what scripture is St Paul actually referring to?

Well, when I sleep I am told that I sometimes snore, but there may be those blessed souls whose peaceful slumber is so silent and still that it may have a resemblance of the souls slinking off to a better place – specifically heaven! A sleeping form may resemble that of a corpse.

In Ephesians Paul is telling us that there may be those Christians who, although believing and baptised, live as though they still lived in darkness. It is as if they are walking around fully alive but in spiritual terms are asleep – in their sleep they are no different to those whose life is in darkness, death as opposed to life.

So it is with lots of stories of those being raised to life physically; from Elisha raising the widow's son to Jesus doing the same, right up to the raising of the young girl ('she is not dead but sleeping') and, ultimately, Lazarus. All may be in one sense a physical raising, or resuscitation if you prefer, but in that they point to the raising of Jesus from the dead, they point to a 'spiritual' awakening which is called 'resurrection', and is a renewal and affirmation of life – totally different to a resuscitation of someone who will later die. In contrast the waking life, which Jesus brings, and offers to us to share in, will never come to an end.

I hope that by now you have not nodded off and are contributing to the snoring which the NHS tries valiantly to rid us of. I just pray that as we approach Advent and Christmas our physical life may not be that of sleepers, yawning and snoring, but, like Handel exhorts in the Messiah, we may as sleepers 'Awake', to the tremendous life to which Jesus offers to lead us where, without the benefit of tennis balls, there will at least be no more snoring!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
October 2018

Dear Friends

The famous trapeze artist and tight rope walking genius, Blondin, would, in the 1850's and 60's, regularly walk across a tightrope over the Niagra Falls, 180 feet below him! Once, about to push a wheelbarrow on the tightrope over the falls, he asked the journalists standing by if they believed he could do it, and they all assured him with one voice that they believed that he would. However, when he then invited one of them to volunteer to climb into the wheelbarrow to provide a passenger for his latest exploit, they, not surprisingly, all declined. Not that they need have doubted their original faith in Blondin. Without any semblance of today's health and safety equipment, Blondin managed to find volunteers from elsewhere on more than one occasion; not only that, he traversed the falls in other novel ways; in turns blindfolded, in a sack, trundling a wheelbarrow, on stilts, carrying a man (his manager, Harry Colcord) on his back, sitting down midway while he cooked and ate an omelette, or standing on a chair with only one of its legs balanced on the rope. In 1861, Blondin first appeared in London, at the Crystal Palace, turning somersaults on stilts on a rope stretched across the central transept 70 feet (21 m) from the ground. On one occasion in London the rope on which he was walking snapped, causing the death of two men, one on each scaffold tower at either end, which both were pulled to the ground; Blondin however, survived! Rather more prosaically on 6 September 1873, Blondin crossed Edgbaston Reservoir in Birmingham. A statue built in 1992 on the nearby Ladywood Middleway marks his feat. His last performance was in Belfast in 1896 and he died, peacefully at his home in Ealing, London the following year aged 72.

The journalists who at first professed such faith in Blondin believed that he would reach the other side with his wheelbarrow; they believed, but they didn't have enough confidence in him to put their lives, literally, on the line. In John 6:27, Jesus answered a question with the words "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." To believe not just with words, or even intellectual assent, but to climb, as it were, into the wheelbarrow pushed by Jesus, wherever it is suspended!

'Believe' is a strange word. It is used in John's gospel 92 times, often on the lips of Jesus. He calls people to believe in him in the sense of putting their trust in him, having confidence in him, putting their lives in his hands; not so

much what they believe about him as much as being prepared to commit themselves to him.

In English 'believe' can mean in one sense a balance of probability (I believe that my car will start when I get into it because it usually does – but there is room for doubt, especially if like our family this summer, you try to start it in France, outside the Guite you need to leave so that the next guests can come in, and with a carful of two weeks' worth of dirty clothes shoved into shopping bags!)

'Belief' can also be a pronouncement of blind hope, often in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary – rather like my son's opinion that the football team that he, (I was about to say 'follows', but that would be putting it too lightly), 'supports', are going to win the premier league this year. They might, but it's only him who thinks so.

'Belief' can also mean that we trust a scientific or historical fact to be true; I believe that, for instance Tokyo is the capital of Japan, that the moon is more or less spherical, that Julius Caesar once landed in Britain – even though I've never been to Japan, the moon or 1 C BC Britain. Sometimes established beliefs are challenged; for many years for instance King Richard III was thought to have had a stoop and a deformity of the spine; this was challenged when no evidence other than Shakespeare's fanciful portrayal of him as a 'hunchback' could be found, then opinion was that he had been maligned by Tudor propaganda; and then a few yeas ago his body was identified beyond doubt, underneath a car park in Leicester, and, you've guessed it, King Richard III's skeleton showed that he had a stoop and a back deformity!

The belief that Jesus speaks of is not that of balancing probabilities, blind irrational faith or acceptance of established facts. The word used in the New Testament for 'belief' could better be understood as 'trust', 'place our confidence in', 'rely upon'. That is all that God requires of us, the 'works' he wants from us. Perhaps our responsible role in society conditions us to feel more comfortable earning something or paying a price for something –it's harder perhaps sometimes to have the grace to receive something with thanks and gratitude. But that is what God offers us. There's no price for us to pay or way for us to earn our way to a perfect life – we all know that this is never going to happen anyway. What can happen though, if we have the humility to accept it, and perhaps the courage and trust to step out into it, is to climb into Jesus' wheelbarrow, let ourselves be pushed across the tightrope of life by him and 'believe'; that's all that God wants from us – oh, that and the knowledge that he might occasionally flip summersaults on stilts on the tightrope, and that if he does, it will still be alright.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
August 2018

Dear Friends

Once, a man went to market with a sum of money which he intended to spend and, having enjoyed a drink or two, returned home with just a basket of eggs. On his way home he had to cross three toll bridges, a bit of a problem as he hadn't any money. When he explained his predicament to the keeper of the first toll bridge, the bridge keeper proposed a solution; he would take in lieu of money, half the man's eggs plus half an egg. This was agreed and duly handed over. At the second toll bridge the same thing happened; the toll bridge keeper took half the remaining eggs plus half an egg. Again the same thing at the third, half of what was left plus half an egg. When the man returned home, his basket was empty, all the eggs had been used up in toll payments. What is the least number of eggs the man could have started with to end up with none is the puzzle, as I'm sure by now you will have realised this to be? The answer comes at the end.

If, like me, you can't work out the answer for yourself and have to be told, doesn't mean that the puzzle doesn't have a solution, its just that you may not be blessed, as sadly neither am I, will logical, mathematical and deductive skills in superabundance. What it doesn't mean, and, I may venture to suggest, can never mean, is that there isn't in fact a solution – its just that I wasn't clever enough to work it out.

Matthew 5:37 tells us that Jesus had some interesting things to say about truth, "But let your yes be yes", he tells his disciples, "all else is from the evil one". In other words, you don't need to emphasise some things with oaths for them to be 'more' true than others; something is either true or not, real or unreal, gradations of truth are deceiving and unbecoming in Christians. So if something is true it is always true. If it was true in Jesus' time it is just as true in ours; truth, like facts, like solutions to puzzles, are not relative – and if we sometimes have difficulty in seeing that; if we in other words, have doubts, as we all do from time to time, its not that the truth is not here, or real, or in some way relative, its that we don't have, yet, the eyes to see.

This I think is true in our own personal relationships just as it is in our relationship with God. We all, from time to time cause anger, or fear, or sadness, or exasperation in other people – I know I certainly do. Sometimes other people, perhaps unintentionally, cause these and worse, perhaps, in us. We only need to look around the world to see where the results of confrontation, or alienation, or hostility in such occasions will lead. If, on the other hand, we have the strength, and the optimism, to see that the truth about other people – even those we maybe on less than happy terms with – is not that much different to ourselves, then I believe that literally, that truth will

set us free; that such pain as we may cause others, or others may cause us, is less than the truth that essentially we are all the same; flawed, often despite our best intentions making a mess of things, sometimes acting out of fear rather than love. That is sometimes a very hard thing to see, but true, I believe nevertheless.

My son who is doing his A Level RS course argued the case with me recently that what is true in one situation may not, in fact be true in others; light goes in straight lines, for example, until it is put through water, when it bends. Someone, say Kennedy, he said (he's also doing A level history – Cold War at the moment, so you can see how he's thinking) is dead, sadly, but dead nevertheless. Yet in, let's say for example, the year 1960 people would have said, "Kennedy is alive" – so are both true? Is truth, whether factual, moral, ethical or spiritual relative to the situation, situation ethics for example. Is the 'right' thing to do always right in any and all situations? I would hold that all theft is wrong, but is robbing a bank really the same as a homeless man snatching a £5 note from the hand of a drunken rich student, deliberately taunting him by burning £5 note in front of him (as actually has happened this year – the student was formally reprimanded by his college). I don't think so. Yet we could say that the truth about Kennedy, as expressed was not so much different in two situations as, well, incomplete. A fuller picture of the truth is that Kennedy lived between 1917 and, tragically, 1963, as I'm sure some reading this will remember only too well – that is a bigger picture of the truth than , person X is alive, or, person X is dead: and I told my son as much.

What is true, I believe, is always true – whether we can see it or not. That God loves us, cherishes us, wants us to have good, long, happy and fulfilled lives is I believe always true, whether we are in a time or stage in our lives that we can see this clearly or, as so often happens, and will happen to all of us, it may be much harder to see.

So the solution – you'll have to look further in the magazine to see it!

Have a great summer

Your friend and vicar
David

The Solution

The number of eggs the man starts off with is seven

The first toll bridge keeper takes half the eggs, ie three and a half, plus half an egg, which makes four; leaving three

The second bridge keeper takes half of the three eggs remaining, ie one and a half, plus another half an egg, which makes two, leaving one

The third bridge keeper takes half of the one egg remaining, plus half an egg, ie the other half, making one whole egg, the one egg left, leaving none

Vicar's Letter
July 2018

Dear Friends

We have at home a photograph on display which is so much a part of our family and so familiar in its place that, like many objects we get used to seeing every day, we hardly notice that they are there. In the photograph there is one figure, a smart, handsome, intelligent looking young chap – at least in his own mind at the time – on the day of his wedding. Next to him is his beautiful bride, his mother and father in law. Of course the beautiful young bride is my wife, Sue, and the handsome young chap, well, how times take their toll, is of course me, or at least my younger self.

Looking at myself in a smart new suit and with some dimensions of the body somewhat different to their ratio to others now, I point out to anyone who comments on it that I can remember exactly the moment that the photo was taken, I can see it now, the photographer, the gardens behind him, the family friends and well wishers from the Church where I was curate at the time who all turned up to throw confetti and give a hearty cheer as we emerged from Church. Like many other in a similar position I have also had the withering question asked, especially by my adoring children, “Dad, is that YOU?!!!”

Is that me? Well that is a question which it is interesting to unpack. Because of course, the ‘that’ in the question is a picture, an image next to some other images. Technically speaking it is only our minds which make the various chemically tinted dots and coloured patches on the, rather good quality, photograph paper, come together to produce anything meaningful at all. The ‘that’ in the question is in fact only a collection of chemicals put together *** years ago, and are there to be viewed today.

And yet, these same chemically produced bits of colour speak very deeply to me. Not because it reminds me of a certain amount of lost vigour and bodily shape. Like any other very happy day, the memory of part of it produces in me, like in anyone else, a rush of pictures, sounds, smells and impressions of other people – many of whom are no longer with us – and triggers so many happy emotions. Anyone can share this experience, we just need a certain picture, or reminder of some part of it to remember happy times, or dad times, or any other kind of times come to that.

Of course the photograph is both a collection of chemicals and an arrangement of them in a certain way, a picture of my younger self in this case, at the same time. If we looked at the photo under a microscope all we would see is dots and blobs. If I look at the photo of myself it is, at the same

time, myself, and myself on a particularly memorable day. Both are real, an outward sign of what is for me, a deeply important inward reality.

The Church of course has a word for this, it is called 'sacrament' – the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality. We all know that, just as in my photograph, the chemical elements in the bread and wine are still those of bread and wine after the prayer of consecration. But that still doesn't stop them being something else at the same time, the memory, experience and, for some of us, the actual reality of Christ himself. By that reality we literally take into ourselves the living presence of Jesus – at the same time as them being fermented grape juice and a rather cardboard tasting bit of gluten.

And that's just Holy Communion. The Church has other sacraments; baptism, confirmation, marriage, reconciliation – which are all similarly outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual reality. But there is more; what for you is the equivalent of my wedding photograph? What signs are there in your home, workplace or even neighbourhood, or perhaps in far flung places, of time, places and people who have been an important part of your life and experience of what it is to be a human being? These, I would argue, are just as valid sacraments as any we find in Church, just as my wedding photo is for me – because by them, we glimpse something of the perfect love that we can share in when we meet Jesus sacramentally in our lives.

What's more sometimes, whether at home or in Church, the familiarity of these sacraments risks becoming so much a part of our regular routine that we take them for granted, and maybe even sometimes stop noticing that

they are there at all. Whether or not we do, the reality they point to, whether divine or experience of it in times and places in our lives, never goes away, it is always still there. It just sometimes takes a question from a maybe less that admiring observer to make us notice them, "Dad, is that YOU?!!!"

Your Friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
May 2018

Dear Friends

Some readers may be old enough to remember the 'Silurians', an advanced race of reptilian humanoids who lived long before humanity and kept tyrannosaurs as pets! That no slight is intended in this opening remark can be shown by the fact that the 'Silurians' existed, as a few may in fact remember, only within the confines of the TV Series, 'Doctor Who'. But

proving that ancient and indeed industrial societies did not in fact exist prior to modern humans is, according to a new book by two eminent scientists, extremely hard to disprove. Or. To put it another way, if there had existed, before modern humanity, advanced and industrial societies, would we ever know?

From Raquel Welch battling dinosaurs in a bikini, to David Icke's theories about an ancient race of lizard-people, we are used to tales of long gone societies inhabiting the earth. Dismissing them as the fanciful nonsense they almost certainly are is, according to Nasa Climate scientist Gavin Schmidt and New York university astrobiologist Adam Frank, surprisingly hard. They have published a paper; 'The Silurian hypothesis: Would it be Possible to Detect an Industrial Civilisation in the Geological Record?'. They conclude that we probably could but that finding it would be incredibly hard.

Of course, the sub-text to their paper is the effect on geology of climate change, not really about whether such fanciful notions of the Silurians, or Miss Welch's bikini for that matter, had any basis in fact. Its about how we can know and, in terms of climate change, how much danger we don't.

But consider for a moment. According to the evidence of pollution in the atmosphere gleaned from bore holes in the arctic, carbon emissions from the time of the industrial revolution were matched by those around 100BC to about 400AD, the time of the Roman Empire. So, we might conclude, detecting previous civilisations would be easy? Not so fast, warn the professors. The Romans fall well within the confines of our own world civilisation, roughly 10,000 years since the end of the last ice age. What about evidence from much earlier than that? The professors have, to put it mildly, a point. Fossil evidence would be one way of looking – but fossils are unfortunately incredibly rare; dinosaurs existed for hundreds of millions of years and yet the number of dinosaur fossils number only a few hundred thousand, about one every 10,000 years – which would be just one fossil for our entire post ice age civilisation, making the chance of a future civilisation finding a car driving fossil vanishingly small. All right then, we may ask, what about changes in carbon or oxygen levels in the stone record, like the carbon found in the arctic bore holes. A civilisation massively harvesting energy would surely leave some rock record? The problem here would be that any change could be attributed to any number of other things including natural and massive known climatic events such as changes from a completely ice bound earth to a completely ice free greenhouse earth which, as I understand it, happened many many times.

The scientists' point is not that we might not know about some advanced civilisation which preceded us, but although despite how incredibly hard it is to both disprove and to prove things in prehistory there are basic things which we can know for sure.

Things that we can know for sure. What a problem that has been for so many, and no doubt at some times in our lives, if we are honest, for ourselves. How can we prove that God is real? This is perhaps what it

comes down to at its most pure? And the answer of course is that we can't, which is a stumbling block on the road to faith for everyone.

Well, some may, and do, argue, that we have the gospels; surely they are evidence and in the historical sense that they are documents dating back to almost the time of Jesus himself. Which is true; but they are just that, documents, pieces of writing pointing to a great truth, not in themselves the truth itself. I have known, and have been fortunate enough to receive, the expert teaching of many people who know every word of the gospels, who can read them in their original Greek, have visited all the sites they describe, understand, in a nutshell, the gospels in far more depth than I do, and yet have no faith, indeed in some cases are avowed atheists. To be an expert in the gospels, and from that the whole Bible, does not necessarily bring faith in God.

So what about the teaching of the Church, surely the most brilliant minds over the last two thousand years have managed to communicate something of the reality of God in such theological concepts as the trinity, salvation through faith and redemption. Sadly the stumbling block there is just that word 'communication'; I have read countless books by famous (to some) theologians, read even more marvellous poems, some by non religious writers, heard songs and seen paintings which communicate God to me – but its an experience which can't be always guaranteed to be experienced by others, let alone forced on them; it has surely truly been said that you can't argue or reason someone into faith.

So how can we know God? Well, if he is God, he must surely by definition be completely beyond our understanding, so much so that we can never know him by going looking or searching in the record – be it fossil, rock, archaeological, documentary or philosophical. If he is God we can surely only really know him by what he shows us of himself, by what he reveals to us. And how can we see what God reveals to us? I don't think we can. The key for me is not to 'see' God at all, but to come to 'know' him. And I don't mean knowing in the sense of knowing that the dinosaurs were wiped out 65 million years ago by an asteroid, or knowing that the battle of Hastings took place in 1066. I mean knowing in the sense that you know someone who you love, and knowing them better and more deeply the longer you spend with them.

To come to know God we have to look at the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the experience of God in the present by which we can come to know Jesus. And know him not in the sense of reciting what records or documents tell us about him, but the person to whom those historical records and evidence point.

This is a truth about Pentecost which those who came before us in the Church understood well. That it's not by reading the stories of Easter, or in fact by reading or learning about anything which happened in the past that we come to know God for ourselves. Its about moving on from all that we learn and know in our minds to be true, and letting us experience and know the truth to which they point for ourselves in our heart. You don't need to be an expert in

biblical studies for this to happen, you don't need evidence from the past at all, just an open mind and an open heart to realise that there will be some things which we may never know but one person who we can always come to know for ourselves, and that is God.

Your Friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
April 2018

Dear Friends,

One day, one David Blair forgot to hand over a key to a ship's crow's nest locker containing binoculars. The ship was the Titanic and he was taken off at the last minute. The consequences have been seen to be catastrophic.

As the officer responsible for all the navigation equipment Blair was involved in all sea trials to test the Titanic's seaworthiness and was set to be second officer for the maiden voyage to New York, but White Star Line, the ship's owners, drafted in a Henry Wilde from sister ship The Olympic because of Wilde's experience of large liners. Blair had sailed from Belfast to Southampton on the Titanic but was surprised and upset to be taken off there and replaced by Henry Wilde. In Blair's surprise however the crow's nest locker key was not handed over, and the binoculars it contained could not therefore be used by the ship's crew to look out for hazards.

Mr Wilde was one of more than 1,500 people who died when the Titanic struck the iceberg in the early hours of 15 April.

Mr Blair, who died aged 80 in 1955, was later awarded the King's Gallantry medal for jumping into the Atlantic on another occasion to rescue a crewman.

The key to the locker was itself sold at an auction for £90,000 in 2007.

Is it right though to pin the blame, as Blair did himself for the rest of his life, for the Titanic disaster entirely at his door, or for that matter at the door of the decision to suddenly replace him which probably caused him to forget to hand over the key, until it was too late? A surprising number of things actually had to come together and go wrong for the disaster to have happened, no binoculars being only one of them: for example the ignoring of repeated ice warnings in an area notorious for icebergs, the decision to carry on sailing at all rather than waiting for the sea fog which obscured the iceberg to lift, the even more cavalier decision to increase the ship's speed to full steam in an

effort to get to New York early, the decision of the captain, as the most experienced officer, to retire to bed in the midst of sea fog and ice warnings – these all must surely bear an equal portion of blame. Even had the liner rammed the iceberg it would almost certainly have remained afloat, instead it swerved at the last minute attempting to avoid the iceberg which then ripped through several of the water tight bulk heads in the hull, causing the hull to flood, rather than puncturing just the front one. Even when the disaster had happened, had there been enough lifeboats, even had there been a lifeboat drill – which there hadn't – loss of life might have been minimal, or even avoided altogether.

These, together, are the factors which had to come together for the Titanic disaster to have happened. We most of the time like to look for one cause of something but, as my old history teacher used to tell me, most things have multiple causes; look for at least three.

Not only are causes often diverse and unexpected, so are consequences and subsequent events. One of the strangest and most surprising stories I have heard about the Titanic, or rather about those who sailed on her concerns one John Priest, born in Southampton in 1887 and one of the few firemen (stokers) to survive the sinking on 14/15 April 1912. The firemen had a long way to go to get from the boiler rooms to the deck. As most of the lifeboats had left by the time that Priest made it out on deck he had to dive into the sea and swim for his life in very cold water before eventually being picked up by lifeboat 15.

Nautical emergencies however were not unknown to Priest, who had previously been on board a ship called the Asturias when it was involved in a collision on her maiden voyage in 1907. He was also on board the Titanic's sister ship Olympic on 20 September 1911 when she collided with the cruiser HMS Hawke.

Nor was disaster at sea to remain a memory, let alone put him off his (relatively well paid) trade. Indeed these were only the start. When war came Priest found himself in February 1916 a member of the crew of the armed merchant cruiser HMS Alcantara, a sister ship of the Asturias and was helping to enforce the Allied blockade of the Central Powers. On 28 February the Admiralty warned the Grand Fleet that a German raider was attempting to break out into the Atlantic. Just after 8am on 29 February Alcantara spotted smoke and soon afterwards received a signal stating 'Enemy in sight.' Alcantara closed on the smoke, which belonged to a one funnelled steamer flying Norwegian colours and bearing the name Rena on her stern but was actually the German raider SMS Greif. Greif dropped her Norwegian colours, revealed her guns and opened fire when Alcantara was about 1,000 yards away. A close range battle then took place and Greif's crew began to abandon ship after about 15 minutes and Alcantara, which had been hit by a torpedo, had sank by 10:45 am. The British picked up 220 out of about 360 men on board Greif, with 69 of Alcantara's crew being lost, Priest was amongst the survivors

John Priest then joined the crew of the Britannic, the Olympic and Titanic's sister ship, which was serving as a hospital ship. On 21 November 1916 she struck a mine and sank near the Greek island of Kea. Thirty died, but the survivors included Priest and two other Titanic survivors: Violet Jessop, a stewardess who had become a nurse, and Archie Jewell, a Titanic crew's nest lookout.

Priest's fourth sinking occurred on 17 April 1917 when he was a fireman on board the hospital ship Donegal, which was torpedoed and sunk in the English Channel. He received a head injury but survived, although 40 others either drowned or were killed in the explosion.

John Priest died on land decades later, in bed, of pneumonia.

There are lots of strange and surprising stories too at Easter time; insurrection in the temple, betrayal, fear of the mob, a death in three hours when days would have been the norm, huge stones being rolled away, angels, weird gardeners, sudden appearances on roads and in rooms and disappearances at a meal, huge trawls of fish and sudden elevation into the sky. The consequences are even more fantastic and varied, if not infinite – the books of the New Testament only scratch the surface of what happened. We will never know all the facts, we probably have only a fraction of the stories. But what can come together are these stories' interaction with our own lives. Our reading of the Easter stories is not like watching a film of the Titanic, entertaining as the fictitious characters played by actors like Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet may be. Unlike watching them, who waited for a redemption which never came, according to the film, we are not passive spectators. Our faith is based not a set of teachings, parables or even stories. It is not actually based on writings at all. Our faith is in a person, Jesus, who invites us to share our lives with him and, through our interaction with him, of which the bible stories are only a way in, find opportunities, consequences and surprises so unexpected and diverse that, like the true reality of Easter itself, can never be fully be written down, let alone predicted or explained. Letting go of trying to do so may indeed be the key to unlocking our ability to see that.

Your Friend and vicar

David

The last photograph of the Titanic as it left Cobh, Southern Ireland

Vicar's Letter
February 2018

Dear Friends

An eminent Physicist has recently published a ground breaking study of a question which has long puzzled scientists, namely the study of how cycling works, "Everybody knows how to ride a bike, but nobody knows how we ride bikes," says Mont Hubbard, an engineer who studies sports mechanics at the University of California: What unseen forces allow a rider to balance while pedalling? Why must one initially steer right in order to lean and turn left? And how does a bike stabilize itself when propelled without a rider? Answering this question with terms such as 'force', 'spin', 'trail' and 'turn', is even more impressive for this noted scientist for the simple reason that he himself is unable to ride a bike! In other words it is possible to describe the physics of how cycling works without knowing how it feels to actually ride a bike.

With the advent of self driving cars and even self navigating drones, might it soon be possible for a machine to do something which up until now it has taken the necessity of a human presence to achieve – to ride a bike? This raises all sorts of questions about what machines can achieve and where that achievement may lead – ultimately, can machines think? It was a question posed by the mathematician and Bletchley Park code breaker Alan Turing and it is a question still being asked today. What is the difference between men and machines and what does it mean to be human? And if we can answer that question, is it possible to build a computer that can imitate the human mind?

There are those who have always had robust answers to the questions that those who seek to create artificial intelligence have posed. In 1949 the eminent neurosurgeon, Professor Geoffrey Jefferson argued that the mechanical mind could never rival a human intelligence because it could never be conscious of what it did: "Not until a machine can write a sonnet or compose a concerto because of thoughts and emotions felt", he declared "and not by the chance fall of symbols, could we agree that machine equals brain - that is, not only write it but know that it had written it." Yet the quest rolled on for machines that were bigger and better at processing symbols and calculating infinite permutations, but what drove them to imitate the operations of the human mind? It ultimately leads to the question of whether intelligence is the defining characteristic of humanity and if it is, how is that different to 'artificial intelligence'?

In the early 1700's there developed the phenomena of 'automatas', machines which ran on clockwork but were so complicated that they could imitate certain aspects of human or animal behaviour, and pretty convincingly. There was the famous flute playing automata, shaped like a human, which could actually play tunes on a flute! There was the famous mechanical duck, which waggled, quacked, ate and even left 'duck mess' behind. At the time people, (or at least the tiny minority of aristocratic rich people who actually saw them) found the automata extremely disturbing – subconsciously asking the question of what exactly it is which makes 'us' different from 'them'. Its

basically the same question behind the famous 'Turing Test' (the same Alan Turing from earlier): If you put a computer in one room and a human in another and got someone to ask the same questions to each of them, and that someone was unable to tell, from their answers, which was the human and which was the computer, then we could say that we had there an 'intelligent machine', in other words, artificial intelligence. He needn't have waited so long – from the 1960's computers have been able to beat Grand masters at chess! And yet this still poses more questions about what it is that makes us human – you could find a computer which may be better than me at chess (not a particularly difficult task in my case!), but could it stretch out its hand to catch a tennis ball thrown nearby, or a cricket ball passing through the air? Could it run up and down steps and know to take care when they are slippery? Could it even manage to get our ten year old to go to bed on time on a school night?!! Surely these are also all forms of 'intelligence', just a different kind to that which is needed to play chess – the last one being more a combination of intelligence, trickery and downright bribery!

The 'Blade Runner' films starring Harrison Ford ask the same question. They are set in a future dystopia not very far ahead when artificial intelligence has developed to the extent that it is virtually impossible to tell the difference between 'replicants' (intelligent robots) and humans, with the consequence that replicants, originally created to serve humans, are threatening to supplant humans, and do so more effectively because its difficult to know who is human and who is replicant (spoiler alert there!!). The same is true of the recent TV hit 'Westworld'. If machines did develop to the extent that they could not only programme themselves – another defining characteristic of what would be 'artificial intelligence', and one which has already arrived with the advent of the IBM 'Quantum computers' – but not even realise that they were 'machines' at all, what is the answer to the question of why a human mind is more sacred, special and different to any other form of 'mind'?

Perhaps one answer may be found in Jeremiah 1: 5

““Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

And Luke 12: 7

“But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.”

Like Jeremiah, we are of infinite value to God who gives us, like the prophet, a purpose and a meaning to our lives, rather than either purposelessness on the one hand or a single, unalterable task on the other. We are not automata, created to do a given job or perform some endless task, and with no possibility of ever doing anything else. We are not even highly developed versions of that. We are, I believe, qualitatively different to any machine in that, for religious people, the purpose God created us for is there to be discovered on a lifetime of adventure. That adventure is about discovering how wonderful life can be, and how much more there is of it to be discovered. In other words, although it may be possible to describe how a bike works, and even one day maybe even to programme a machine to ride one, I don't think it

will ever be possible to create an artificial entity capable of knowing how it feels to ride and so which, like me, would want to – and for no other reason than enjoyment!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
January 2018

Dear Friends

If I had to think of a visual aid to help us think about Epiphany, the major feast which falls in January I think I know what it would be. It's only small, and you may find it rather surprising, but it's particularly apt for the twelfth and final day of Christmas and the Eve of Epiphany. Epiphany, remember, is when we remember the Three Wise Men and their gifts, and when we celebrate the truth that Jesus is God in human form.

I'll reveal my secret object in a minute or two, but first let me run through three things that you may wrongly be expecting me to bring out.

Firstly, I wouldn't be holding up a lump of gold. Of course, that would have been a great visual aid. Gold was and still is the gift of kings. And when the Wise Men held out their gift of gold to Baby Jesus, they were saying something very special: "However tiny you are, and however wrong a place this filthy stable is for you to be, you are a true king, and you are worthy to receive this gift of kings."

Second, I would not be carrying any myrrh. That too would have been a brilliant visual aid and a fragrant one as well. Myrrh is an aromatic potion that was used to prevent the spread of infection and mask the smell of death and decay. And by presenting Jesus with myrrh they were symbolically anointing him for death and burial.

And finally, it's not frankincense either. That would have been another great visual aid, because for thousands of years and in many different cultures across the globe, incense has been the traditional offering to a deity. And in presenting the infant king with such a gift, the Wise Men were saying, "You are not just a king; you are God himself come to earth in human form."

So, if it's not gold, myrrh or frankincense, what would I produce and hold up for all to see? Well, we do celebrate the visit of the Wise Men and the Epiphany, and when we do we are actually celebrating the central truth of Christmas – the truth to which their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh bear witness: the truth that Jesus is God come to earth to live and die as one of us. But the real message comes down to this: The party's over. It's time to take down the decorations, vacuum up the pine needles, consign the turkey leftovers to the freezer or better still the dustbin, and let the Baby Jesus grow up into a man. And here at last is the little epiphany – the word means revelation – that I promised earlier

A Cream Egg – on sale in January from every supermarket, usually 3 for £1!

There are some Christians who moan on that Easter eggs are already in some of the shops in January. I hope I'm never one of them. Actually, I think that's quite helpful symbolism. Of course, there's nothing exclusively Christian about chocolate eggs, but they do symbolise new life. And they do help us remember that once Christmas is over, Easter is (theologically as well as on the calendar) just around the corner. And as Christmas makes way for Epiphany, this is the point where we have to leave our mental pictures of Baby Jesus behind and focus afresh on the grown-up God-Man who died to bring us new life.

As you eat your choccy eggs in January, please remember the truth they represent: that the Christmas story ends not with Epiphany, but with Easter.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
December 2017

Dear Friends

As this is my Christmas letter (written, though it is, in the middle of November, still, the Trafford Centre decorations are up!), I thought I'd give a template of how to write a Christmas family letter, of the sort which we regularly receive and you might also. If not, count yourselves lucky! (I should add that this is not the only kind of 'family' Christmas letters we receive - we get some really nice ones too – so view this as a sort of 'how not to write a Christmas letter!')

Every Christmas Letter Ever

Start with a sentence about how the year is almost over, in case you don't know how the Gregorian calendar operates. Then a trite phrase about how quickly time passes, probably stolen from a friend's Facebook wall. Follow with an attempted joke that doesn't work.

The first paragraph is about the hubby (as it is compulsory that the wife writes it). The dad in this family probably got promoted and now has additional responsibilities that the letter writer sincerely hopes will make you question your choice of a life partner. The rest of this paragraph will highlight regular stuff that every parent does; like coaching a children's football team (who obviously win their league) or building a shed in the back garden. After briefly mentioning some award received at a convention in London, or, even better, York, or wherever, it's time to make this Superman appear more human, so... Snarky comment about how the dad didn't beat his marathon time from last year's London Marathon because he did something stupid like hurt his toe during training, (but still took part, obviously).

Let's move on to the kids, who are better than your kids in every way. These ways will be listed and categorized by child's name, age, and some personality trait that nobody but the parents of the child actually sees. If a child had a minor health scare or got banged up while biking or something, it will be milked here for maximum sympathy, perhaps focusing on how hard it was for the letter writer to make it through this tough time. If applicable, the letter will now veer off into a diatribe about how the town should make things safer for young bicyclists. The point will be made at the end of this paragraph that the letter writer is no different than any other concerned parent or citizen, thus clearly implying the exact opposite.

Now let's blow some kind of minor family problem into a full-blown tragedy. The death of a pet, perhaps. Some kind of costly household repair due to a storm would work nicely. If nothing else, this paragraph should focus on how the family has struggled coping with world events, such as a tsunami: Obstacle stated here. Explanation of how the family overcame said obstacle here (in the case of Japanese tsunami, the solution will be prayer and the family moving on to some other issue). Now, here's the poignant end to this section of the letter. While these events would have ripped a normal family

like yours apart, the letter writer's family came together and is now stronger than ever before

Now's the time to mention a friend of the family or a distant relative who did something remarkable, like climb a mountain or meet Michelle Obama at a fundraiser, in order to make the entire family look interesting.

Self-deprecating apology here about how this letter is so long, cleverly implying that your family could probably just summarize your year on a notecard.

Oh, well! Or another mindless statement meant to abruptly end a letter! Mandatory holiday greetings, almost as an aside.

(Family name in script font)

Does this ring a bell – if not, count yourself lucky! But – here is the best part – we are all lucky and never more so than at Christmas. The New Testament is full of letters, called 'epistles', but these letters are not like the barely concealed self congratulatory boasting on display in the letter above. No, these letters tell the opposite story; the story of how, at Christmas, God himself became empty of all his glory – which is better than anything we can imagine or achieve in this world – and entered that world powerless, in the most helpless way possible, as a baby of homeless refugees, of the sort we see sadly too much of today.

What a contrast to the self satisfaction given forth in the template above. What a much better example to copy, not just at Christmas, but as a pattern to follow though life. And what a gift to the world; the story which shows us that, however inadequate we might feel – at Christmas, New Year or any other time, maybe because of what the last year, or few years, have brought – God's gift to the world given at that first Christmas was a humility we can barely imagine, and is there for us for a lifetime of true 'Good News'

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
November 2017

Dear Friends

As keen members of the National Trust our household was pleased to receive this week our new National Trust members' handbook, and with it the car

windscreen sticker which provides free parking! The handbook contains essential information on all National Trust properties, their history, opening times, admission prices etc. As members of course we don't need to bother with admission prices as the excellent value membership scheme provides free admission to all properties, meaning that wherever we travel in the country there is always somewhere special to explore – always with a wonderful tea room (and restaurant for those who can afford it!), it really is good value.

National Trust properties range from ancient stone circles to Roman villas to the Squirrel Sanctuary and beach at Formby and even Lake District shorelines, as well as all the Stately Homes and their gardens and parks you might imagine, like Dunham Massey and Lyme Park (of Colin Firth as Mr Darcy fame). One property in particular which we enjoy visiting is indeed a Stately Home, Calke Abbey in Derbyshire near where my Father in Law lives, visited many times and his good hospitality in the tea shop many times greatly appreciated! However Calke Abbey is a stately home with a difference. My father in law remembers as a child being unable to even see through the estate wall, let alone visit the house and grounds, until the whole grand country estate was given to the National Trust by the Harpur-Crewe family in 1985.

The house and estate were given with good reason, the family were bankrupt and the estate and particularly the house was in an advanced state of disrepair and dilapidation. However, unlike other properties given in similar circumstance, the National Trust chose in this case not to renovate and restore the estate and house to its former glory, which had long since passed. Instead, the Trust had the boldly imaginative idea to preserve the house, stables and gardens as they found them; so beyond securing the structure of the house, to quote the handbook, Calke Abbey tells the sad story of the dramatic decline of the Harpur-Crewe's grand country estate, and in that story the fate of many other similar country houses in the mid 20thC,

“The un-stately home and country estate

With peeling paintwork and overgrown courtyards, Calke Abbey tells the story of the dramatic decline of a country house estate. The house and stables have been preserved as we found them, with many abandoned areas vividly portraying a period in the 20th century when numerous country houses did not survive to tell their story.

Discover the tales of an eccentric family who amassed a vast collection of hidden treasures, with grand rooms crammed full of collections and abandoned rooms and objects no longer used. Visit the beautiful, yet faded walled gardens and explore the orangery, auricula theatre and the kitchen gardens. Escape into the ancient and fragile habitats of Calke Park and its National Nature Reserve.

Don't miss...

- See the stunning state silk bed, erected for the first time in 1985 after lying undiscovered since the 18th century”

To have the imagination to preserve things as we find them, and for a reason, an example. I believe there are lessons in life we can take from this, and especially a Christian life.

When other country houses or stately homes were abandoned by their owners because they had been run into the ground, many different fates awaited them. Not a few were demolished completely like the house at Fell Foot near Newby Bridge in the Lake District where only the grounds and gardens and the footprint of the house remain, the structure being deemed past the state of no return to repair. Others became schools, hospitals, training facilities for the military or commercial firms, some became offices or company headquarters – some, like Wray Castle on lake Windermere became at one point all of those things in its life, before being recently given to the National Trust and opened to the public (well worth a visit!). Some, like Tatton Park or Beningbrough Hall near York were restored to their former glory and today anyone can walk round sumptuous rooms, imagining the opulence and glamour of life there (above stairs of course) in their heyday, imagining that they have always been like that. Well they haven't, most were given to the trust in a similar state of decay as Calke Abbey and what we see isn't what they had become, but a restoration of what they once were.

Incidentally the Trust are also very good at recreating life below stairs, often with volunteer actors barking orders at startled visitors as to the state of their fitness, or otherwise, for the gruelling life that was service below stairs.

The Bible is full of stories of people caught at a dilapidated low ebb in their lives and, as a result of an experience of God or a meeting with Jesus (which is more or less the same thing), move on. Zachaeus up in his tree knowing that the path his life was currently on was leading him to self destruction; the prodigal son, humiliated beyond endurance for a Jew, to look after pigs and realising that this is what he had been really doing all the time he had been buying friendship; the woman caught in adultery whose message from Jesus, "go on your way and sin no more" may apply to all of us; and ultimately I suppose, Lazarus himself: all are led in some way from death to life.

But there are also others whose fate is to be a Biblical equivalent of Calke Abbey; ossified, rooted to the spot of their own anger, sadness, hatred or loneliness, lack of a sense of self worth. We think of the jealous brother of the prodigal son; the sad rich young man unable to see beyond the limits of his worldly wealth when Jesus calls him to follow; the unrepentant thief at the crucifixion; the brothers of Joseph first selling their brother into slavery and then grovelling to him for food without realising who they were bowing down before. Many people are met by God in the Bible and he meets people wherever they are in life, but here's the important part, he doesn't leave them there.

But It's not characters in the Bible I really want to talk about, its us, as individuals, as a Church. Just like those people in the Bible, God meets us wherever we are in our lives, whether that is individually or corporately, and he doesn't leave us there but helps us to move on. I'm sure that God doesn't

want us to be like Calke Abbey, a salutary relic, frozen in time, a warning of what happens if, like the Harpur-Crewe family, we just sit in the decrepit shell of dilapidated former glory, some rooms full of junk from previous lives and others empty, (electricity was only installed in 1962!), of no further use, and waiting for the roof to fall in; at least the Harur-Crewes had in the end the sense to realise that it couldn't go on and let go.

So when I look at Calke Abbey, unrestored, stuck at the end of the road, out of time and place, I also ask what rooms in our lives are stuffed full of useless junk from times gone by, but of no further use, just cluttering up the place, and what rooms are empty, serving no purpose, but full of potential. Answering these questions means not I think a restoration to former splendour, a museum piece of restored glory, like most National Trust Stately Homes are, something artificially preserved from another time. Rather it must be something different, a question only each individual can answer of what to do with their lives, where to go, what to move on to.

Although my Father in Law never did get to run around as a child in the lovely gardens and estate of Calke Abbey, (his running around days are long since gone), at least he does get to walk around it now and appreciate how lovely it is and, through the imagination of the National trust, he did get to see his grandchildren run around there.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
October 2017

Dear Friends

Its not particularly an original thought but, it strikes me that its one of the best lessons we can learn in life, and certainly one which experience will teach us anyway; that things sometimes do not go to plan. Whether for better or worse if we go through life thinking that we know how things are going to turn out, we will pretty soon learn that knowing the future is a gift not given to humankind!

What prompted this not particularly original train of thought was not how the dinner I cooked for my family last night was appreciated by them, their expectations of my cooking are sadly for me rarely challenged, but rather a musing over recent national and international events which, no matter where you stand on the political spectrum, from Brexit to the American Presidential election to the General Election here this year, give the lie to those who would claim to know the future! The unexpected, the element of surprise, the thought, "who would have thought THAT could happen", well, at least that is

one lesson for us all to learn! Another might be a call to re-assess our attitudes and expectations towards those things that we usually regard as too remote to be important. Not only asking ourselves how do we feel about our relationships with neighbouring countries and cultures, but closer to home, about how we relate to and what should be our real responsibilities towards the communities and neighbourhoods which we ourselves belong to? Am I my sister's keeper?!!

In the story of Jacob's wondering in the desert (Genesis 28: 10-22) he has an unexpected experience of God acting in everyday events; to say that Jacob finds himself challenged to rethink his life choices after seeing a ladder connecting heaven and earth is a bit of an understatement. Jacob's response is to see God in the world, where he hadn't before recognised him "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it" (Gen 28: 16)

To see God where we did not expect him may be the first lesson that expecting the unexpected can teach us. Famously rude and haughty in conversation, General De Gaulle had invited Britain's ambassador to Paris for dinner in the autumn of 1945, just after the war ended. Being driven back to the ambassador's residence after the meal the ambassador's wife, the glamorous lady Diana Cooper turned to her husband, the urbane and equally dashing Duff Cooper, 1 Viscount Norwich, and is reported to have said, "Well, duties that we dread often turn out not as bad as we expect them to, but that turned out worse!". Be that as it may the phrase 'God Forsaken' is, as Archbishop Robert Runcie pointed out when introducing the 1987 Church Urban Fund, not one that Christians should ever use.

But the consequence of recognising that God is there at work in every day places and events, whether we recognise him or not is that, as God says to Jacob in the Genesis story, that he is also always with us, each one of us, whatever happens in our life and wherever we may go, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go" (Gen 28: 15) Like Jacob we might also be assured, that whatever happens in our world or in our lives, that there is a power greater than ours – which is perhaps one reason why we find it so difficult to trust – who will always be there alongside us. Unexpected and difficult it might often be, but God teaches us, as he showed to Jacob that wherever we might look there is nowhere where, with Jacob, we might not be able to say "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven (Gen 28:17)

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter

August 2017

Dear Friends,

Istanbul was Constantinople
Now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople
Been a long time gone, Oh Constantinople
Now it's Turkish delight on a moonlit night

Every gal in Constantinople
Lives in Istanbul, not Constantinople
So if you've a date in Constantinople
She'll be waiting in Istanbul

Even old New York was once New Amsterdam
Why they changed it I can't say
People just liked it better that way

I can actually say why the name of the town of New Amsterdam was changed to New York (on September 8, 1664 in honour of the Duke of York) but that's not what I want to talk about in this letter. I could also spend a long time explaining (did someone, as my children do, say 'droning on'?) the timeline by which the Thracian city state of Byzantium (Βυζάντιον), Latinized as Byzantium, was settled by Greek colonists from Megara in 667 BC; of how the name is believed to be of Thracian origin and thus predates even the Greek settlement; how it was changed to 'Constantinople' in 315 AD when it became the new capital of the newly Christianised Roman Empire under the Emperor Constantine; of how it fell, in 1483, to the Ottoman Turks, thus finally ending the Byzantine Empire and with it the last part of the Eastern Roman Empire; and finally of how the new secular Turkish state in 1930 politely requested the rest of the world to refrain from referring to the city by any or all of the above titles and refer to it instead by its Ottoman Turkish name of 'Istanbul'; this being rather like the Germans asking the French to start using the term 'Deutschland' instead of their accustomed 'Allemagne"! Hence the fanciful song above, "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)", a 1953 novelty song, with lyrics by Jimmy Kennedy and music by Nat Simon, written on the 500th anniversary of the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans.

So you will see that the history of the name of one city, admittedly a pretty remarkable one, gives a lot of scope for explanation, (or 'droning on', whichever you prefer), carrying with it as it does so much of the history of Europe; the change of name reflecting the wider changes going on around it.

A postcard, c. 1905, refers to the city as Constantinople, and the inner city as Stamboul.

How we refer to something is often determined by what is going on in the wider world, whether that something is a place, person or idea. Re-watching

the stunning Netflix drama 'The Crown' which depicts the early part of the Queen's reign, there are at one point in 1952 three women who bear the title 'Queen', all living in the same building, Sandringham Palace, with two of them also confusingly being called Elizabeth. To avoid this confusion the servants come up with the idea of referring to them as, in order of age: 'Queen Mary', 'Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother' and, of course, 'The Queen', who still reigns and bears the title to this day. The names stuck, even though all of them had been referred to at one point in their lives simply as 'The Queen'.

The Bible too is full of people whose names change; Simon is changed to Peter, Levi to Matthew and Saul to Paul. Not the least of these changes is how God himself is referred to, from firstly 'Yahweh' (meaning simply 'I am who I am'), to 'Jehovah' and, revolutionary as it must have been, by Jesus as 'Father' and using a form 'abba', which a young child might use to their dad, specifically, 'daddy'. These changes of name go along with, in people, a great change in their lives by which they express their new relationship with God – they are still the same person but the focus of their life has changed – their way of referring to themselves changing to reflect the better self they have become, or are in the process of becoming. The change of name by which God himself is referred to isn't because He has changed, rather it's something in the way in which He is perceived, or related to, that has changed, something more of who God is is discovered and the old name becomes simply inadequate.

So it is and so it must be, and so it always has been with what happens in a church when God is worshipped, when we experience his presence with and through the shared community, which is 'church' itself. If I were to be transported back in time and enter a medieval church anywhere in Europe I would, as a priest, be allowed into the chancel and enter the sanctuary where I would consume both parts of the sacrament. That this would be denied to anyone else in the church, who would also hear me read the entire service in Latin, which they could not understand, we would think of as being an inadequate use of the beautiful church building and certainly an inadequate expression of the worship of God. Skip forward seven centuries to around the year 1900 and the chances are that in the same church, while reading the service in English (although a version of English far removed from the familiarity and perhaps understanding of many of those present) it would still not allow its congregation up into the chancel, let alone the sanctuary, and still not usually give them both parts of the sacrament – for the simple reason that the sacrament would at that time be hardly celebrated in most Anglican churches at all! Perhaps the church is facing another such a call to change in the way we worship God. Certainly churches which are growing, and certainly the best attended of our own services are those which do not focus on the sacrament – if the mountain won't come to Mohamed, then, as it were, Mohamed must go to the mountain.

All this is simply to say that I hope we would all agree that it's not how we worship that matters but who. I am sure that God wants us to experience Him in Church as anywhere else in ways which speak to us now, not to cling on to ways of doing things which are of no more use to us, still less to the many, in

fact the large majority, who live around us and for whom what happens in church is strange and off putting. What happens in a church has always changed and evolved along with the society around it – how many would find a service held entirely in Latin a life enhancing deepening of our relationship with God, as our worship should properly be?

In the modern city of Byzantium, sorry Constantinople, sorry Istanbul, stands the beautiful Hagia Sophia, perhaps the greatest surviving example of Byzantine architecture. Its interior is decorated with mosaics and marble pillars and coverings of great artistic value. The temple itself was so richly and artistically decorated that the Emperor Justinian proclaimed, "Solomon, I have outdone thee!" (Νενίκηκά σε Σολομών). Justinian himself had thus overseen the completion of the greatest cathedral ever built up to that time, and it was to remain the largest cathedral and indeed the largest building in the world for the next 1,000 years, up until the completion of the cathedral in Seville in Spain.

When in 1483 Constantinople fell to the Ottomans the Hagia Sophia became and remained until the Turkish secular revolution of 1930, a mosque. Since then it has been and remains a museum, despite recent pressure from on the one side Islamists to turn it back into a mosque and on the other the American evangelical Christian right to turn it back into an orthodox basilica. It remains the most visited destination in Turkey to this day. In order to maintain its religious neutrality the secular Turkish state made sure that worship, of any sort, was for many years forbidden in the Hagia Sophia; carpets were taken up to reveal the magnificent Byzantine mosaics, plaster was stripped off to show the stupendous Byzantine murals. There was though provided within this most magnificent of buildings, and only for the use of the museum's Christian, Jewish and Muslim employees, a plain and bare shared small room for prayers; with prayers from the different religions often taking place at the same time. This room has no official name; to some it is a worship place or space, to others a prayer room, its name doesn't matter really, church, mosque or synagogue, it is just there as a place for people to worship God, call it what you will!

The Hagia Sophia
Istanbul

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
June 2017

Dear Friends

I have a photograph, printed, as it is from the days before digital photography, of myself with the great Pyramids of Giza standing majestically in the background. The pyramids look exactly as you would expect: three imposing stone structures standing in the desert sands with a vast vista of emptiness stretching seemingly limitless behind them. This fine scene, of the pyramids I mean, is taken from the vantage point of the camera, obviously, because it is looking out towards the pyramids and the sandy desert and so fits our preconceived notion of how the scene looks in our mind's eye. Quite a different picture would meet the vision of anyone looking in the opposite direction, the direction that I was facing, namely away from the pyramids. As anyone who has ever visited the site will know, the pyramids do not stand amid miles and miles of empty desert but instead are at the edge of the vast sprawling urban metropolis that is modern day Cairo. Far from seeing the desert view of the camera, my eyes beheld, behind my friend who was taking the photo, a bustling riot of shanty dwellings with all the comings and goings that might be found at the outer edge of any large middle eastern city. The pyramids and the sphinx which stands beside them are not in the desert at all, but, I suspect have halted the encroachment of a city of nine and a half million people, whose outer edge they mark.

The picture we have of things in our mind's eye is not always matched by the reality. The picture I had of the pyramids was true when looking one way, but shattered mercilessly when looking the other. The picture I had was in fact a myth – factually untrue but helping to convey a deeper truth. And that deeper truth, in this case the majesty and mystery of the ancient Egyptian monuments, was not in the slightest part for me dimmed by the experience of visiting them. The huge stone relics of a culture so utterly alien to us now are just as exciting to visit, and must really be visited to be really experienced, whatever their location. Indeed, the fact that they are to be found not, as I imagined, in the middle of a sandy desert, but at the bustling and teeming edge of a modern middle eastern city only reinforced the power of their utter strangeness and otherness from our modern experience of life. The impression which my mythical picture conveyed was not dimmed by the reality I found, if anything it was enhanced, it's just that the mythical picture was factually wrong.

Much that we take for granted in what has come down to us from the past might also be viewed in the same way. Consider for instance the story of

King Alfred burning the cakes. The fact is that in 878AD, despite being paid the previous year the Danegeld 'protection money' tribute to keep them at bay, the Viking army, led by the Danish King Guthrum, drove Alfred and the west Saxons westwards into the marshes of Somerset where, at Easter, with a small band of followers, Alfred survived by dodging from islet to islet foraging on whatever they could be given by the local population. But from this desperate plight comes one of the best known tales in English history. Taking shelter in the home of a poor swineherd whose wife was busy baking some bread, the story goes that the refugee king, sitting by the fire, was so preoccupied by his problems that he didn't notice that the loaves were burning. "Look here, man", exclaimed the woman, who did not know that her bedraggled guest was the king, "you hesitate to turn the loaves which you see burning, yet you're quite happy to eat them when they come warm from the oven!", and in some versions of the story, then beats him with her sweeping brush! This endearing story ends with the apologetic king meekly submitting to the woman's scolding and setting to work tuning the bread.

The story however does not come, unfortunately, from Alfred's lifetime. The earliest manuscript that recounts the burning of the loaves (which have been turned into 'cakes' over numerous retellings) was written over a hundred years after Alfred's death and is not mentioned in the contemporary Anglo Saxon Chronicle. Much was written about Alfred both during his own lifetime and in the years immediately after his death so it seems unlikely that such a good story, if it were true, wouldn't have been written down on parchment like much that was actually true was. It is most likely a folk tale handed down by word of mouth, a myth by the strictest laws of historical evidence but conveying the deeper truth of lots of other episodes of Alfred's life, which were documented in his own lifetime. These build up a picture of a great warrior and nation builder, who was to go on and beat the Vikings in May 878 at Athelney and so establish the kingdom of Wessex, saving the emerging English language and, through its later expansion into the rest of what was to become England, establish the country we know as England today. Alfred is the only English King to have the prefix 'great'. This comes not only from his mighty conquests but also from his well-documented modesty, learning, passion for education (he put together a panel of scholars to translate all the known major Latin works into English) and spirituality. "The saddest thing about any man," he wrote, "is that he be ignorant, and the most exciting thing is that he knows." Comparing his life to a house built out of whatever timber he could forage from the forest of experience Alfred describes how "In each tree I see something that I require," advising others to "go to the same woods where I have cut these timbers" where each may construct "a fair enclosure and may dwell therein pleasantly and at their ease, winter and summer."

Reading Alfred's actual words it might reasonable be assumed that such a spiritual and modest man might have accepted a deserved reproof from whomever it came regardless of their station in life. The myth of the story of Alfred and the 'cakes' conveys this inner truth whether or not it ever really existed in fact. The picture we have of Alfred from the cakes story is perhaps true as a picture of the man himself which is for me more important than whether this or that episode ever took place in this or that particular way.

Looked at this way the difference between what is myth and what is reality is far less important than the much more interesting and infinitely more rewarding understanding of the truth that the myth conveys. Children are not interested in whether their Easter Eggs come from Tesco's, Sainsbury's or courtesy of the Easter Bunny; they just can't wait to rip off the foil wrapper and taste the delicious milk (usually) chocolate inside – our own children are about as much interested in the fact that I prefer dark chocolate to milk chocolate as they are in the proportions of cocoa, sugar, milk and preservatives which make up the delicious, addictive and increasingly expensive hardened goo which they, like millions of other children, eat rather too much of on Easter Day.

So what of all the incomplete, contradictory and far-fetched stories we read of at the ends of the gospels in the Sundays after Easter? What about the even more incredible stories in Acts, to say nothing about the strange festivals which the Church keeps between Easter and Pentecost (which include the Ascension, St George's Day, Philip and James – about whom virtually nothing is known, the visit of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Elizabeth and Pentecost itself)? What about other seemingly and often non-Biblical festivals such as the Assumption, the Annunciation – Lady Day and Christ the King? What are we to say about these things if, at this distance, we can say anything meaningful at all? Are these just myths, do they have any basis in actual history, are they true? I suspect the answer depends on how they are seen, how we view them and that their basis in historical fact is of far less importance than the deeper truths they convey. The truths that these myths, if they are myths, tell us is to be found in the rich depths of their utter strangeness, mystery and unknowableness. Things can be true in many different ways; it just depends, like my picture of the pyramids, which way you look at them.

Your friend and vicar
David

Vicar's Letter
April 2017

Dear Friends

On a recent family trip to Edinburgh, like many fans of the Harry Potter series of films and books, we made our way to creepy Greyfriars Kirkyard and the grave of 19th century gentleman Thomas Riddell, who died in 1806 aged 72, whose name may have inspired that of JK Rowling's famous villain Tom Riddell, aka the nasally challenged Lord Voldemort. Although little is known

about the original Thomas Riddell's life. 'J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books has previously said that the tombstone of Thomas Riddell Esquire in the famous Kirkyard may have subconsciously been the inspiration for anguine Voldemort's true name, since she often took strolls through the spot, which is overlooked by the Elephant House cafe, where she wrote several of the books. The nearby gravestone of poet William McGonagall is also said to have offered inspiration for the name of Professor McGonagall, the head of Gryffindor, while nearby George Heriot's school is claimed to be a template for Hogwarts.

Some Edinburgh University students, who now run The Potter Trail – a trip through city spots connected to the texts – say people may be getting in a 'muggle' between fact and fiction. One said: "The recent trend to leave notes and such has been building up over the past month. The fact and the fiction have become a little blurred – on the tour we do state that 'This is Voldemort's grave' but most people understand he is just an inspiration." The notes appear to have been left by people from all over the world. One says, "RIP Tom, thank you for making us all believe in magic. You are an inspiration." But not all visitors believe the magic, with one mean-spirited note saying: "Dear idiots, you know there's a difference between fiction and reality, right?"

The difference between fact and fiction, fiction and reality. That difference is a stumbling block to many people who I have talked to about Easter, and specifically the resurrection of Christ, without which, St Paul reminds us, our faith is null and void. In another old cemetery I once visited, In the old cemetery of Christ Church, at Fifth and Arch streets, Philadelphia, USA, the passerby can see through the iron railing the grave of one of America's greatest men and one of the world's most versatile geniuses. Walled off from the city's roar and traffic, as if to comment upon the vanity of it all, you can just observe the flat stone over the grave of Benjamin Franklin which bears the epitaph which he composed:

Like the cover of an old book,
Its contents torn out,
And stripped of its lettering and gilding,
Lies here food for worms;
But the work shall not be lost,
For it will (as he believes) appear once more
In a new and more elegant edition,
Revised and corrected by the Author.

That the work shall not be lost but will re appear, elegant, new and exactly how the author intended may be one way of beginning to approach the mystery of how the resurrection, or any resurrection, can contain both joy and sorrow, happiness and sadness, like two sides of a coin, at the same time. The difference between fiction and reality, or at least how it has come down to us, may in this way be seen as, at best, missing the point. My children greatly appreciate the CBBC series 'Horrible Histories', in which a certain licence is taken with historical scenes and characters, but the essence of the person or period are brilliantly conveyed. In one memorable scene a group of visitors to

Oliver Cromwell is shown suggesting things that they may do that day, which happens to be Christmas Day. At each suggestion, each one of which forms part of our modern Christmas, from eating mincepies, via singing Carols, to giving presents, the Lord Protector of England shouts "Guards", as each one was actually banned under the Cromwellian regime. The scene ends with one of the visitors suggesting "I know what we can do, we'll go to Church!" which brings forth the predictable response "Guards!", as going to Church at Christmas was actually also banned by Cromwell's puritan regime. Now I'm not suggesting that the series' creators are saying that the actual scene depicted ever took place, and I'm not pretending that the message provides a fair or balanced understanding of the complexities English 17thC religious and political issues – but it does cut straight to the essence of it and conveys it brilliantly - to any age group.

So it is I believe with our understanding of the resurrection of Jesus and what has come down to us as a picture of it, the details are to miss the point, it is the essence, the message which is life giving. Whilst visiting that graveyard in Philadelphia I came across another story from the American War of Independence, or 'Revolution' as the Americans have it. During the War a young officer in the British army, before embarking with his regiment, became engaged to a young lady in England. In one of the battles the officer was badly wounded and lost a leg. He accordingly wrote to his affianced bride, telling her how he was disfigured and maimed, and so changed from what he had been when she had last seen him and they had plighted their troth that he felt it his duty to release her from all obligation to become his wife. The young lady wrote an answer not less noble than that which she had received from the young man. In this letter she disavowed all thought of refusing to carry out the engagement because of what had happened to her fiancé in battle, and said that she was willing to marry him if there was enough of his body left to hold his soul!

Well the week of Christ's death, burial and resurrection was a week that began with tremendous excitement and great expectations for these early followers of Christ. The followers of Jesus were ready to crown Him as their King, only to have all of their hopes and expectations crushed because of His death. They were unable to grasp the significance of what was taking place. Their belief in Christ was so shattered that even after His resurrection they were slow to believe. All of Jesus' disciples and other followers forsook Him, one betrayed Him and one denied Him. Matthew 26:56 says they all forsook Him. They had lost hope, Peter was mired in self-pity and despair. Matthew 26:75 says he went out and wept bitterly.

They had given up all to follow Christ and now they were filled with bitterness and total disillusionment. They no longer had the direction or meaning to life that they had experienced during the 3 and a half years they had been with Jesus. They were lost and without hope. But all of this was about to change because of the resurrection of Christ – if only they would dare to believe once again.

Like the first disciples, there are many people today, and perhaps for all of us at sometimes too, who with them are searching for a glimpse into the path God has purposed for our life and to discover our destiny and purpose. In doing so, we will be able to live the role created for us. Whether we are just starting out on that journey, anywhere in the middle, or have become detoured and lost our way, we sometimes need help to shine the light on the invisible path that leads to God's goodness and to experience His kingdom within. The great Easter truth is not just that we are to live newly after death – that is not the only great thing – but that we are to live here and now by the power of the resurrection; not so much that we are to live forever as that we are to, and may, live better now because we are to live forever.

The truth of what the resurrection means is not to be found in any graveyard, whether in Edinburgh, Philadelphia or 1stC AD Palestine. That's why the writer of the Greyfriars note had it spot on in describing an inability to separate reality from fiction as 'idiocy'. Just as the angels said to those who first experienced the resurrection that the reality was not to be found in the tomb but out among the living, so we too miss the point if we dwell too much on the details. Resurrection may never be contained to a graveyard just as that English soldier was no less himself after he lost a limb than he was before – it's the essence that's important, not a list of facts.

One interest of mine, as a great lover of history (you'll notice I avoided the word 'scholar') is how little we know about the period in English history from when the Romans left in 415AD until about the time of King Alfred, around 890AD. We know so little both because so little was written down (and what little there was is often contradictory) and very little of that has survived and come down to us. As if that's not bad enough, buildings were mainly of wood rather than stone and so very few archaeological clues remain other than stains and discolorations in the ground. This vast period of time of warrior chieftains, of the real person on whom King Arthur was based maybe, in which the foundations of what became England were laid, is largely unknown; the lives of those who lived in it lost to us. It has been famously described by an eminent real scholar of the period as being like 'a vast, unknown continent about which, from time to time we may find a clue; but that clue is only like glimpsing a distant headland of that vast continent from a passing ship'. The glimpsing of a distant headland of a vast, unknown continent – the resurrection in a nutshell!

Your friend and vicar
David

Vicar's Letter
March 2107

Reading recently in the excellent new book on evangelism by our Archdeacon Mark Ireland, I was fascinated by his description of the Jesus Boat and the lessons he draws from it:

“Visiting the sea of Galilee recently, I saw the so-called ‘Jesus Boat’, a wooden vessel discovered embedded in the mud of the lake floor a few years ago, when drought had made the water level exceptionally low. The boat is of a size suitable for fishing, and dates from the first century, hence the nickname. One remarkable feature of the boat, archaeologists discovered, was that 12 different types of wood were used in its construction, a number of them clearly reused from other vessels or objects. Pondering the skills needed to build and repair boats like that made me realise that carpenters and fishermen in a place like Capernaum would naturally have known each other and worked together, which suggests that the encounter on the shore would not have been their first meeting, and may explain Peter’s apparent willingness to let Jesus commandeer his boat as a pulpit in Luke 5:3”

Researching the boat does indeed confirm that the boat’s construction conforms to other boats constructed in that part of the Mediterranean during the period between 100 BC and AD 200. Constructed primarily of cedar planks joined together by pegged mortise and tenon joints and nails, the boat is shallow drafted with a flat bottom, allowing it to get very close to the shore while fishing. The boat was row-able, with four staggered rowers, and also had a mast allowing the fisherman to sail the boat. The boat has been dated to 40 BC (plus or minus 80 years) based on radiocarbon dating, and 50 BC to AD 50 based on pottery (including a cooking pot and lamp) and nails found in the boat, as well as hull construction techniques. The evidence of repeated repairs shows the boat was used for several decades, perhaps nearly a century. When its fishermen owners thought it was beyond repair, they removed all useful wooden parts and the hull eventually sank to the bottom of the lake. There it was covered with mud which prevented bacterial decomposition.

Fascinating as this is in its own right to me, I was equally intrigued by the Archdeacon’s conclusion – that “The call of the first disciples happened (not in a religious setting but) at their place of work, when Simon and Andrew were casting their nets into the sea, and James and John were mending their nets. Matthew’s encounter with Jesus also happened at his place of work”. He points out that, of the 168 hours in a week we are usually awake for around 120, and how many even regular Church attenders spend more than at best 10 of those hours either at Church or involved in Church activities. So at least 110 hours of even most Church members’ lives will be spent away from a specifically religious environment – “at home, work or in the neighbourhood – this, then is their primary context of their discipleship”. So it might be that efforts to get people to come into our Churches are less about following the pattern set by Jesus than those which involve going out to meet people as and where they are. Indeed I was heartened to see the suggestion that ‘making disciples’ is truly focussed when it is about deepening faith rather than concocting novel ways of getting people to come to our traditional services.

Consider the example of Jesus himself. Jesus wasn't content to remain in an isolated hill village where everyone know everyone else. Instead he moved to Capernaum to begin his ministry, a bustling centre of trade and commerce on the Via Apia trade route where a cosmopolitan and diverse section of cultures met and passed through. Just as fishing boats in Jesus' time were not the work of one single boat builder but required a range of skilled craftsmen working together to produce, so Jesus goes to where people live, work and find nurture to meet others and bring about a community. Making new disciples, Mark Ireland suggests, is above all else something that finds its fulfilment in the places outside Church where people live, work and look for happiness and fulfilment:

"drawing more people into running the church system can stifle the primary mission to which they are called...the discipleship of all God's people, lived out among neighbours, in the workplace, in the community"

Where church life is about getting people to do things in a church in ways that they have always be done is therefore contrary to both the example and calling of Jesus. We can follow Jesus' example more nearly when we focus on not our own preferred ways but are prepared to leave them behind and go to where people are, as Jesus himself did. If we don't we may be condemned to be like the author who wrote:

"I am out of humanity's reach,
I must finish my journey alone"

The writer is none other than Alexander Selkirk, 'during his solitary abode on the island of Juan Fernandez', the model on whom Daniel Defoe based Robinson Crusoe. Selkirk went on to write:

"I am monarch of all I survey;
My right there is none to dispute;
From the centre all round to the sea
I am lord of the fowl and the brute
O Solitude! where are the charms
That sages have seen in thy face?
Better dwell in the midst of alarms,
Than reign in this horrible place.

If a fisherman followed a carpenter because they were already used to working together the challenge for us, if we are not to let our church become a horrible deserted island disconnected with the society around it, must be to look outside it for new ways of working with modern day fishermen and carpenters, and with each other.

Your Friend and vicar
David

Vicar's Letter
February 2017

Dear Friends

On 30 June in 1860, Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, known as 'soapy Sam' because of Benjamin Disraeli's description of his slippery or evasive words, spoke at a famous meeting of the British Association in Oxford about the nature of human ancestry. Legend has it that he attempted to pour scorn on Darwin's Origin of Species, but that his scepticism about evolutionary theory was roundly defeated by a certain scientist, and inventor of the word 'agnostic' T. H. Huxley. In this memorable encounter Huxley's simple scientific sincerity apparently humbled the clerical superiority and religious certainty of Soapy Sam; the idea that the Church could dictate to scientists the conclusions they were allowed to reach was decisively defeated.

There is no accurate account of the event, but according to some sources, Wilberforce turned to Huxley and asked: 'Is it on your grandfather's or grandmother's side that you claim descent from the apes?' whereupon Huxley retorted: 'If the question is put to me would I rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather or a man highly endowed by nature and possessed of great means of influence (meaning Wilberforce himself of course) and yet who employs those faculties and that influence for the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion – I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape.' In other versions it is more simply quoted as 'I would rather have an ape for an ancestor than a bishop'

Either way, the statement was so shocking that, apparently, a certain Lady Brewster fainted on the spot and had to be carried out. If only such emotional sensitivity towards the public sensibilities of bishops were evident these days. So how times have changed, or have they?

I was watching, on You Tube, a staged re-run of the debate in the Oxford history museum, between Richard Dawkins, the famous scientist, atheist and

campaigner against religion, and John Lennox, a mathematician and philosopher of science, but also a Christian. At one point, when they discuss the possibility that the universe has an intelligent design, John Lennox says this:

‘The fact that we have the language of DNA points ... to the existence of a logos, a divine logos who started it, rather than the notion that it’s going to be exhaustively explained in purely naturalistic terms ... I’m not just terribly tempted to believe it’s all been designed. I believe it’s all been designed.’

Dawkins’ reply reflects Huxley’s sentiments, 150 years before, in accusing the Christian of abandoning reason in favour of myth and magic: ‘when you feel like it’, he said ‘you smuggle in magic, you smuggle in magic for miracles, in the bible, and you smuggle in magic to explain the origins of life... ‘

Fundamentally, therefore, the accusation is the same in both debates: whenever Christians cannot explain the workings of nature and the universe, we fill in the gaps with a divine explanation: the God of the gaps. In this context I find Lennox’s use of the term logos is very intriguing, as he is tapping into a very strong theological tradition which finds its origins in John’s gospel, where the meaning of the Greek ‘logos’ is the eternal and uncreated ‘Word’, ‘In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.’

The logos is a way of trying to describe the indescribable. But I am more than a little uneasy with using this theology as a rebuttal of scientific atheism. For one thing, a ‘God of the gaps’ must keep shrinking as the gaps get smaller, and I for one find the idea of a shrinking God deeply heretical! Secondly, the notion of a logos does not work as a decisive argument against a purely naturalistic explanation of the origins of the universe and is easily dismissed in such a context, as Dawkins has well demonstrated. However, far from being a meaningless concept, it is, in fact, about something much more important. It is about a deeper truth and reality, not really concerned with intelligent design, or explanations, or indeed science at all, but to do with very personal questions of purpose and meaning and the spiritual life.

For St. John and St. Paul, the fact of creation is one thing, with all the questions it raises, but it cannot be separated from another fact. The fact of Jesus Christ, the historical figure who lived, taught, died, and rose again. Once Jesus’ life and death are taken seriously, St. Paul would say, then the question of how the universe came into being, and how it exists, are seen in proportion to a profound question of why life exists, and for John and Paul, (if not for George and Ringo!) their personal experience of Jesus Christ, his life, teaching and resurrection, not as an ancient myth or magic, but as a recent and fresh reality in their lives, gave them a strong conviction of the significance of Christ for their own lives and for the whole of humanity. Clearly their first hand experience of Christ, the logos, made such an impact upon them as to cause them to reconsider their preconceptions about literally everything.

If, as Christians, we are to get anywhere near that kind of passionate belief, without switching off our rational minds, we must also experience something of the reality of God, albeit two thousand years later. I want to suggest that we can do this, for there are more ways of knowing something than simply absorbing facts. One analogy might be that of music; the beautiful singing of the choir, a Bach Cello suite, a Beethoven string quartet, can be explained scientifically in terms of sound waves and frequencies interacting in an organized pattern, but the meaning of music which is clearly a personal encounter that can move us to tears and transform our lives, goes well beyond such a set of facts. The philosopher Roger Scruton calls it 'aboutness'. A Mozart Sonata is about something. We may not be able to articulate it, indeed we cannot and may not want to, otherwise why have the music? But it is about something that touches us deeply. It transcends the mathematics and physics of the sound and transports us to another reality, more about spirit than about sound.

One person who understood this clearly was the French Reformer of Geneva, John Calvin. For him knowledge of reality was not simply merely a matter of cognition in the narrow sense of the term, as though such knowledge were merely a matter of patterning the mind. Knowledge involved love, trust, fear, obedience, and worship. It embraced mind and heart, affections and will and work. It rested on God's free grace towards us, and focussed on the duties of love toward God and toward one's neighbours.

I'm not sure that anyone would have left the Dawkins/Lennox debate with any of their fundamental ideas challenged, on either side. But there have been billions of lives utterly transformed to the depths of their souls by the presence of the indescribable gift of the eternal Christ. Like Huxley, I would rather acknowledge the fact that we all share a common ancestor with all living things than use a God given faculty to wilfully deny what is demonstrably true. Like Dawkins, I also think that using God to plug the gaps is lazy and, is also, in some ways, blasphemous! God is a living presence which, like music is an experience. Faith in that living presence, that experience, may be a gift, and it is a gift which is there waiting for all of us and as we respond to it, from wherever we might have come, whatever we might have seen or been through, or perhaps for those too who even only who want to believe, invites us, like a good song, to sing along.

Your friend and vicar
David

Vicar's Letter
December 2017

Dear Friends

A while back I was browsing, by the magic of catchup tv, various comedy series which I remember from many years ago and which I never thought I would see again; but which now, miraculously, can be seen again, and in our living room. Those of a certain age may remember a strikingly idiosyncratic, and at the time I remember very popular, BBC 'sitcom', if that's the right word for it, from the 1970's called 'The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin'.

Reginald Perrin, played brilliantly by the great Leonard Rossiter was a typical, for the time "middle class, middle aged, umbrella swinging salesman" for 'Sunshine Desserts', a jam making 1970's company of the sort which would have long since gone out of business. Reggie Perrin, as played by Rossiter is the superb embodiment of a hapless middle aged pedlar, bored with his job whose life is an endless round of tedious dinner party following soul-sapping meeting following nightmarish in-law visitation with exhausting relentlessness, and who realises that he's been sleep walking his life away. Perrin supposes that his path to happiness is blocked by what one reviewer called 'the greatest concentration of loveable Berks ever gathered together'. These include two 'yes-men' whose function in Sunshine Desserts is to agree with everything that the boss, CJ, says; one following the other with a sycophantic, 'great', "super". CJ himself is a corporate tyrant, whose initials are of course a reversal of JC, and constantly reminds his cowed staff that "I didn't get where I am today by....." whatever the latest inadequacy he perceives in them is.

Perrin begins to see that all the asinine trappings of mid 1970's middle class life, which are brilliantly parodied in the show, from a colour supplement feature on jam making to cosy Building Society ads, are the totality of his world,; all the things which nobody ever asked for but which are presented as indispensable. To bust out of this stultifying, life limiting world, Perrin fakes his own suicide on a beach at night (which, soon after the novel by David Nobbs on which the TV series is based came out, the MP John Stonehouse did the very same thing!). In the wrong hands this plot could be seen as very dark, but with a combination of brilliant acting, script and direction, 'The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin' shows comedy to be a sharper tool than drama for conveying the depths of someone cracking up.

I realise that, for a December magazine vicar's letter this has not been very Christmassy so far. But let me assure you that it is. Think for a moment of the greatest Christmas parable of them all, 'A Christmas Carol'. There, in the figure of Ebenezer Scrooge, we see the embodiment of the redemption that the Christ child brings. Here is a man whose life has become so limited by disappointment and struggles, all of which we see courtesy of the ghosts of Christmases past, present and future, that he has become a selfish reclusive miser: the opposite of what Christmas is truly about.

By a process of letting him see himself and how he became the wretched, lonely monster that others see, Scrooge, as you know, realises that it doesn't have to be like that and, in the words of George Eliot, 'Its never too late to become what you might have been'. The redeemed scrooge who gives away so generously at the end of the Carol discovers that joy and fulfilment come with giving and fellowship, not with accumulation and possession. The ads for

the all those middle class trappings of Reginald Perrin's world (which at best would today be considered 'retro') were the very things, Reggie realises, that limit and circumscribe his world and his life. To find true life he must free himself from them. In the same way does the redeemed Ebenezer Scrooge not think twice about giving away all that he once clung onto but which was in fact destroying him. That the Carol was written by Charles Dickens as a response to the life limiting squalor he saw in the Manchester of the 1840's shows it to be a reaction to and a parable about how to escape all that would limit our lives and make them less than they might have been, and still could be.

Without giving away too much of a spoiler, Reggie Perrin, like Ebenezer Scrooge, also finds a redemption, of sorts. Although Reggie comes to realise that the fake suicide was not necessary to have left his old world behind, he nevertheless knows that he had to leave it. This is the invitation given to us by God which we celebrate each Christmas: that through the gift of God coming directly into our world, we are invited to live in it with him, that we might not be limited to the things which the world values, whether colour supplements on jam making or whatever, but are, like Ebenezer Scrooge, invited to see how we might really have life, and have it in all its fullness. Great, Super!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
November 2017

Dear Friends

I was recently listening to a radio programme (The 'In Our Time' Podcast actually) about how in 1831 a relatively uneducated and largely self taught chemical assistant at the National Institution in London, named Michael Faraday discovered electromagnetic induction. This is the principle behind the electric transformer and generator, the discovery which was crucial in allowing electricity to be transformed from a curiosity into a powerful new technology and which basically changed the world from being steam powered to being electrically powered.

What Faraday discovered can be shown in a simple experiment. Take a metal screwdriver and a piece of plastic coated wire. Wrap the middle section of the wire round the metal shaft of the screwdriver in coils until two ends of wire come off the screwdriver at each end. Now attach each end of the wire to a battery. If you place a pile of paper clips at the flat end of the screwdriver they will be immediately magnetically attracted to the point at the very end of

the screwdriver and become attached to it. If you take away one end of the wire from the battery they will start to drop off as the electromagnetic field established by the electricity going round the coils of the wire wears off. Further, the more coils are placed around the screwdriver the more powerful the electromagnetic field becomes and the more paper clips the flat end of the screwdriver can pick up. In the same way less coils will produce a lesser field and less paper clips can be picked up. The importance of this discovery cannot be overstated to our society. Electromagnetic induction powers every electric thing in the world including the computer I'm currently typing on – its not stretching the point to say that it has created the modern world!

Now not many people understand what exactly is happening when the electromagnetic field is created, still less are able to explain it to the uninitiated in terms that someone who is not an expert in sub atomic physics can grasp. Its enough for me to know that there are at least some people who at least think they know, as I understand it, and many more who can make use of it.

It reminds me a little of a Church. Not many people have more than a rudimentary understanding of the relation between to various persons of the Holy Trinity – and that despite great tomes of theology being written about it over the centuries. Having had to plough through more than a few of them I can honestly say that I am still none the wiser! However, although I can't adequately understand how the Holy Trinity works (still less explain it in a way that can keep people awake) I am sure of the power it can give through the gift of the Holy Spirit and I'm much more interested in what this power can do in people's lives. What's more, rather like the numerous coils being wound around the screwdriver, I've seen and had my observations confirmed by others, that the numerous people coming together in groups, trying each of us in our less than perfect way to follow Jesus, can generate a power and an attraction which can touch people's lives in transformative and powerfully deep ways. I'm sure that this was far from the thoughts of Michael Farady when he saw how the more times he coiled the wire the more powerful the force became but there it is, in a sense the Holy Spirit works in the same way!

As a young sixth former I used to enjoy the music of a musical trio the name of which I will tell you if you ask me. Although their music was enthusiastically received by those of us who were devotees, not to say fervourous disciples, often to the point of obsession, I am sad to say that it was not perhaps appreciated as much by the population at large, not as much as I thought it should be (and still do!) anyway. Despite this limitation, and the outright hostility on the part of some youth sub-cultures at the time, the trio in question went on to enjoy not inconsiderable chart success. Indeed at the time of their disbanding, sadly too soon in my opinion, they were the single biggest selling group in the country. This was down to the fact, I have no doubt, that anything they released on single or album (yes it was vinyl in those days) was immediately purchased by almost every single one of their large, but alas not worldwide, following, I nearly said 'worshippers'.

Being a true disciple myself I had listened every day for at least two years to one or more of their songs and could virtually recite the lyrics word for word of each and every song. I had thought I had reached the pinnacle of adulation in the satisfaction that listening to their music brought me. But it was not so. I discovered that there was yet another level of musical appreciation I had not even known existed. This I discovered at Deeside Leisure Centre on November 3 1980 when, along with 5,000 other (oops, I nearly said their name), devotees I enjoyed what, to me, was a revelation in musical appreciation, if not mass crowd hysteria, beyond anything I had imagined. Yes, not only was this my first glimpse of my heroes in the flesh, it was also my first proper 'gig', which is to say it wasn't a 'rock' concert as the music was, in the ears of the devotees, most definitely not described as 'rock' (wrong sub-culture) – but it was a huge exciting, buzzing and truly electrifying experience, at least for me, nonetheless. It was a revelation. It wasn't so much the music (although that to me is timeless), rather the atmosphere: the energy, electricity, excitement and sheer joy which comes with 5,000 people who all appreciate the same thing appreciating it together.

I went on to see this trio another two times, including on their farewell tour in December 1982 (that should give at least some of you a clue as to who they were) and on one other occasion, 33 years later when, last year, I took (or rather bribed to come with me) my daughter to the Clitheroe Grand to see one of the members of this trio re-enact the glory days with another two musicians; call it a tribute act to himself if you must but it didn't feel like that to the, much less than 5,000, worshippers, the magic was still there.

Now I'm not suggesting that you need a congregation of 5,000 to feel the electric presence of the Holy Spirit, or that only large congregations can have the resources to provide an attraction to others to join them. By no means; the spirit can fill each one of us in times of solitude, out on a walk in the country or wherever two or three are gathered and it's true that you don't have to go to Church to be a Christian. It's just that without that shared experience we risk being a bit like me before I went to the Deeside concert: I thought I had the ultimate experience in my favourite group's music, only to find that there was a whole new experience which was bigger, better and beyond anything I could imagine, it stays with me to this day.

It's just also that it might be better to have more coils around a bigger screwdriver if we want to attract more paperclips than having several little ones which are not very powerful and which dissipate their potential. I enjoyed the small concert at Clitheroe Grand, I enjoy still the sound of my favourite trio, (although these days via itunes rather than on vinyl) – but none of this compares to the 5,000 worshippers at Deeside roaring out, to a person, their call for an encore.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
October 2016

Dear Friends

In our garden stand three apple trees. The trees are, I know, some very many years old, as I can see from old photographs taken in the garden, some pre war. Looking at the trees you might be forgiven for thinking that they have seen better days; bits of them with no apples on, no leaves or any sign of life at all. Similarly the apples that the trees produce (and which are currently ripening, falling from the trees and lying, waiting to be collected on the vicarage garden), are not, perhaps, the ones you might choose from the fresh produce department at Tesco. Small, mis-shapen and blotchy, the taste their appearance suggests is only confirmed when you bite into them, not something I would advise doing, although they are nice stewed, with crumble, sugar and custard – or whatever your favourite accompaniment to apple crumble might be. The apples lack the sweetness of Pink Lady, the glossy crispness of Granny Smith's and the, well, whatever they have that some people somewhat inexplicably see in French Golden Delicious.

Yet my apples share one thing in common with their more famous cousins; they have the 'secret star of the apple' within them. If you have never come across the secret before, take a sharp knife and put the apple on its side, ie the core horizontal to the cutting surface. Cut the apple in half sideways, ie across the core not through it. Inside you will see what no one else could have possibly seen, the star in the centre of the apple. Yes, thanks to how the pips are arranged, at the centre of each apple, even my humble, mis-shapen ones, lies a star. Try it and see.

Now I'm not going to advocate the chopping of humans in half and I'm sure that there might be better ways to prove my point, but I believe the same to be true about humans: that is, every human that is living, regardless of class, race, religion or education, and every human who has ever lived too. No matter who he or she is, young or old, rich or poor, handsome, beautiful or otherwise, they have a star within them, a star given them by God. Sometimes that star is easy to see, for example like in people known throughout the world for their good works (St Mother Teresa of Calcutta is one, in the house of whose good works I was privileged once to sit, the only time to my knowledge that I have been under the same roof as a saint, or at least one recognised as such by the Church). Or it might be someone known to only a very few and who, like most people who have ever lived, will be completely forgotten within a few generations of their passing. But what, I am certain of, is that all these people share a star within them.

Sometimes, because of how the world has treated individual people and the bad choices they have made as a result, that star is hidden; behind appearances, behaviour or personalities, which, on the surface, may appear

less than attractive, even to themselves. Sometimes its hard to see, and yet we would do well to follow the example of Jesus who saw God's star in the lives of those who were also on the margins of their society; what, I wonder, are today's equivalents of tax-collectors, prostitutes and Samaritans? Yet they too have a star within them.

And just as we need food, water, fresh air and sunshine if we, like my apple trees, are going to flourish physically, so do we need a spiritual and inward nourishment if the star within us is going to shine out and grow and be seen, even if only by ourselves or those around us. This might be Bible reading, attendance at Church services to receive the sacrament, or a discussion and reflection on some Church teaching. Just as good is a walk in the countryside, doing someone a good turn or taking a decision to make a positive change in our lifestyle (although sticking to it is not always as easy, but the Lord loves a tryer!), listening to a good piece of music, reading a good book, learning something that you didn't know you didn't know or a hundred and one other ways in which the star, or soul, call it what you will, is nurtured.

This autumn, as fruit falls from the trees and the rhythms of Church, school and work get back to normal after the holidays we can see nature changing, sometime spectacularly so, all round us. If we can find a way of nurturing that star we each have within us, given to us as a precious, loved, individual and infinitely precious child of God, then the spiritual nurturing of our souls can also have an opportunity to change us too. In the eyes of the world we might not all be a Pink Lady, but surely we can do better than be a French Golden Delicious!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
September 2016

Dear Friends,

During our summer family holiday this year to Devon, some of our children, including the youngest, pleaded with me to let them go 'coasteering'. Coasteering, in case you hadn't heard of it is advertised as being "all the things you wanted to do as a child at the coast but your parents wouldn't let you."

It consists basically of putting on a strong wetsuit and crash helmet, being taken by mini bus to a particularly rocky part of the coast with waves crashing in and then jumping off the same rocks, which in other circumstances might accurately be described as 'cliffs', into the same crashing waves. Despite the assurances from the group 'leader', (who appeared to be not much older than our eldest child) that the activity was perfectly safe, the location tried and

tested by 'professionals', (whatever they might be in those circumstances), and that the water was deep enough for even the largest person to plunge into safely, it did take all the considerable powers of persuasion our youngest child has, which are many, to make us agree. Needless to say, that despite our misgivings and my wife's inability to look at any of our children as they plummeted off the precipice, hurtling towards those same crashing waves, they all emerged safely from the experience and, far from, in my view being lucky to have had a narrow escape, all seemed enthusiastically keen to repeat the experience again, and as soon as possible!

Watching a family member leaping off a cliff can be a pretty disconcerting experience for anyone. For me it was doubly so as it brings home the lack of depth of understanding I have had in one of my favourite and, no doubt, oft repeated, analogies of having faith in God. "Believing in God", wrote CS Lewis, "is not so much something you can try to do as something you finally stop yourself from not doing, like diving into water, its about letting yourself go". Well, as someone who, no doubt erroneously, has always considered himself a competent swimmer and has never, from memory, had any difficulty or fear of diving into the nice, safe, warm water of a swimming pool, I have always quite liked this analogy, because, I now realise, it is about something I have never been fortunate enough to have had much difficulty in doing. When we lived in Wigan I used to take our young children to swimming lessons in what was then the old Olympic sized swimming pool, sadly now no longer there (replaced, as with much else, with something identical to that which could be found anywhere and everywhere). That pool had at one end a three tiered diving platform, with the top one at 10 meters high. Luckily for me the council had long before took the decision to close the platform to public use so I had no reason to have to find an excuse to my children as to why I didn't go up and dive, or even jump, off the highest platform. I wonder if, either by having to think up an excuse or even having to face the terrifying possibility of actually ascending the towering structure, I would have since been so fond of the analogy about faith from CS Lewis?

Watching my children disappear off the edge of a rocky precipice into broiling waters suddenly made me aware of the depth of wisdom in the diving analogy. It wasn't meant to be about something you found easy at all, it was really about stopping yourself from doing something you found terrifying! In other words to make yourself powerless as you force yourself to do that which you most fear. No wonder faith is sometimes difficult and no wonder I have been so slow sometimes to see it. What was even worse for me as a parent than even the prospect of doing the coastering myself was the powerlessness you feel when watching your closest family doing it – it certainly brings you down to size!

Not, I should add, that any of my children showed even the slightest sign of my anxiety as they hurtled enthusiastically towards the cliff edge. It wasn't I think that they possess the bravery I lack and the strength of character to overcome the fear that I could not. I told myself, I hope its true, that at their age I would have had the same lack of awareness of danger and heedless abandon in the face of what, to any normal person would seem a hugely

hazardous activity. No, they, in their turn will like me, I am sure, have to come to face their own versions of what I now perceive in myself as a previously unknown fear, or at least dislike, of heights. The lesson learned for me that day was not about admiration for bravery in others, as I am convinced there was nothing brave about what the children were doing at all, more like fools rushing in where angels fear to tread really. No, the lesson was about how I had thought I had understood something, only to realise how little did I appreciate the depth of a picture I am pleased to so regularly use. It is about just how big is God's care for us that he will support and uphold us no matter how big and terrible that dive he calls for is and how little, or at least how seldom do we all perhaps appreciate it. More than anything it is a lesson learned, as all lessons truly understood must be, from personal experience – the experience of having to trust not for personal safety, but for something even more important.

Your Friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
August 2016

Dear Friends

I recently came upon a Parish Magazine which is unwise enough to invite the opinions of its readers to be published in letters sent in. I am all for listening to the concerns of parishioners and yet perhaps its as well that God gave us powers of following our own conscience and not being led by any and every view one encounters. For your summer entertainment I include a small selection of some of the milder letters which were obviously sent in in a spirit of jest and contain no kernel of truth within them whatsoever, or do they.....?

Dear Sir

Candles are expensive. We use two candles on the altar, two around the altar, and two for the acolytes. That's six candles lit every week. It soon adds up.

I have invented viable solar-powered candles by embedding LED lights into the tops of wax candles, and solar panels and batteries into the candlesticks. Their use would save an average of £14.22 per annum. Services would have to be shorter in the winter, but nobody would mind.

In the course of my experiments I have run up some expenses. I therefore include an invoice for £74.22.

Yours etc

Dear Sir

My seventeen-greats grandfather built Woodby Chapel so he could have a church conveniently placed next to his house. He then knocked down all the copyholders' cottages so he did not have to put up with the site and smell of the peasants, except on Sundays and at Christmas.

And yet, when I asked the vicar if we could hold our Sunday service on Mondays, when he is less busy, he said he was afraid not.

If one cannot get one's own clergy to do what they are told, I no longer know what the Church of England stands for.

Yours etc

Dear Sir

So many people telling us how great it was to celebrate the Queen's 90th birthday with a special church service.

A special united benefice-and-ecumenical church service. If it had not been that the people from all the other churches refused to turn up, St Mary's could have been full.

On balance, I am glad we marked her Majesty's 90th. But I hope we do not do it every year.

Yours etc

Dear Sir

I would like to apologise for the Children's Church presentation of "Our Glorious Queen" at the 90th Birthday service.

In our rehearsals they had pretended to be corgies, they waved Union Jacks and sang "Happy Birthday Dear Ma'am." I suspect they got their ideas from Mr Corbyn, the "trendy" teacher at our Primary. But calling for "class war" and a republic. and demanding that the "Hanoverian leeches cease feeding on the blood of the working class" was definitely not in the script the previous Sunday.

Yours etc

Dear Sir

I heard that the wardens were having trouble with bats.

Bats can be seen as a nuisance – their droppings mean that all items of value have to be covered, and they make an awful mess on the church floor. But they are rare animals, and protected by law.

That is why I nipped in when the church was unlocked and shot the lot with an air gun. Figured that would save the vicar and church wardens a lot of trouble.

Ask no questions etc....

Yours etc

Dear Sir

An apology and a plea, after last month's celebration of Her Majesty's 90th Birthday.

I now know that by "Joint Service", what was meant was a service with our ecumenical friends, and the other parishes in the benefice.

I realised my mistake when, handing out a few spliffs, people pointed out to me that the Health Act 2006 made the tobacco element illegal in church. Also, the Baptists complained, thinking it was incense. Although when I handed out the "turbo chocolate brownies" instead, I did get an invitation to contribute to the next fete cake stall.

As a result of my mistake, and the subsequent raid by Her Majesty's Constabulary (ironic considering whom we were celebrating) I am £100 worse off. Also I now have quite a lot of space in my greenhouse. So if anyone has a few tomato plants they can let me have, I will be grateful.

Yours etc

Dear Sir

I hear that the Vicar has banned the jumble stall from this month's fete on the grounds that all the jumble has spent the last seventy years in the jumble cupboard in the church hall, only coming out for fetes where nobody buys it.

I am outraged. The jumble stall, selling the same mouldy clothes every summer, has been woven into the fabric of this parish. If we lose the jumble stall, we may as well let the tower fall and sell the nave off to the Scientologists.

This means we will have only the crockery stall, the coconut shy and the tombola. Truly a fete worse than death.

Yours etc

Dear Sir

I dropped into the Bell Ringer's meeting last week again. I am rather confused.

A load of people I have never seen in church, all wearing sweaters and ringing bells. Where do they go when the service starts? Do the wardens lock them in the bell tower until the next practice?

Yours etc

Dear Sir

Once again we have been unfortunate enough to have "modern worship" foisted on us, in the Vicar's constant attempt to be "trendy".

Honestly, what he thought he was doing last week, introducing a radical hymn by Charles Wesley was beyond me. My family have worshipped in this parish for 1,000 years. And I do not see how this kind of innovation has been allowed to slip in, unnoticed.

Yours etc

Dear Sir

According to the diocesan training programme, there are certificates for lay worship leading, preaching, children's work, evangelism, church

administration and leading small groups in Bible study. I think these courses are an utter waste of time.

If the vicar didn't learn all this in three years at theological college, why are we expecting him to go on all these courses now, when he should be ministering to people?

Yours etc

"In a time of universal deceit - telling the truth is a revolutionary act."
George Orwell

Have a great summer

David

Dear Friends

Attending the Vision 2026 Evening at Preston Guildhall last Tuesday we heard a wonderful story, which I hope you won't mind if I share with you. It was told by the Diocesan Missioner, Revd David Banbury and was indeed, for him, a very recent experience. On entering, slightly later than intended, the walkway connecting the large multi story carpark to the Guildhall building itself, which was suddenly descended on en mass and at the same time by representatives from all 250 parishes in the Diocese, he was suddenly stopped in his, rather rushed, tracks. A lady who had recognised him from when he had been a vicar in Preston 25 years previously refused to let him proceed any further until she had showed him, on her phone, every last picture she had there of her new baby granddaughter, such was her great joy at becoming a grandmother. It didn't matter that, as one of the organisers of the event Revd Banbury's presence was required, with increasing urgency, in the meeting room organising the meticulously planned and, I have to say, extremely well organised and executed, event. No, what could be more important than sharing the great joy that went along with becoming a grandmother for the good lady, and shared it would be, and was!

I tell this story to show, as Revd Banbury did himself, that, whatever is planned, organised or intended about our faith in Jesus, be it a great rally in Preston Guildhall attended by thousands of uplifted Christians from around Lancashire, as happened last Tuesday, or our own week by week meeting together to worship in our Church – at the root of it all, and without which everything that we do would be utterly meaningless, is the joy that living our lives as followers of Jesus brings. That point was made very clearly at the Preston event by the Bishop of Burnley, Bishop Philip. That what we intend to share in implementing Vision 2026 is not about structures, orders of service or

buildings, but living and inviting others to share in the joy that comes from faith in Jesus. The lady who had known the Diocesan Missioner 25 years ago couldn't stop herself from sharing the joy she felt in her new Grandchild. What we do in implementing Vision 2026 must be from the same sense of joy we feel in knowing Jesus, no matter how convenient or inconvenient it might be for the best laid plans, structures, buildings or whatever.

Let me be clear. I am not saying that along with belief in Jesus, whether sudden, rediscovered or grown into over a lifetime, comes only happy times with nothing much to bother us in life. No, rather that along with belief in Jesus, whether sudden, rediscovered or grown into over a lifetime, comes a deep peace and security in life which can enable us to meet with and transform all the experiences that life may bring. Real joy is not like some transient and soon gone 'legal high', here one minute and gone the next. Real joy is a result of a deep security and peace, never better illustrated than by Jesus himself in telling the story of the wise man building his house upon the rock; real joy from having firm foundations.

There's a word, 'foundation'. The Oxford Concise Dictionary defines a foundation as; 'a body or ground on which other parts are overlaid, a basis or underlying principle'. My point, and I think Revd Banbury's point, in telling the story is just this; that unless the foundation of our Christian life together, which is to say our sense of being a 'church', (as opposed to a church building), unless this foundation is the joy which faith in Jesus brings, then whatever is built on it will itself be joyless, dead and doomed. Further, if we are prepared to build on joy, then what we do build will naturally have to be appropriate to the new foundations and will perhaps look different from what was built in the past, or maybe only what has been left over, what remains from the past. It will, however be a foundation built not on sand but on rock and will stand. Let joy be the foundation of what we build in our Vision 2026 programmes, and let it be so infectious and overflowing that it makes us stand in the way of people who are in a rush, who have somewhere to get to or someone to meet, and by standing in the way and sharing our joy, help them, and us, to realise what life's priorities really are, or could be.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
May 2016

Dear Friends

Vicar's Report to the Immanuel Annual General Meeting
Sunday 17th April 2016

The context of this AGM is the Diocesan Mission initiative Vision 2026, which we as a part of the Diocese are invited to be part of, which the PCC will be exploring by doing the Vision study course and which we will begin to put into effect starting with a PCC away day at a date and venue to be decided. As we move towards the Vision Visitation commissioning event in Preston Guildhall on May 10th we also are thankful of the commitment of Jason Brewer who has taken on the role of Vision Champion, to keep the Mission vision at the forefront of our thinking.

Consequently I would like to use this vicar's report to outline to the AGM some of the thinking behind the Vision initiative, how it could give us what I believe are tremendous opportunities at Immanuel and how this fits in with a wider picture of change within both the Diocese and the wider national church. Furthermore it can be shown how that change, unavoidable though it is, need not be a management of decline but an opportunity to transform our Church to be fit for purpose in bringing God's transforming love to work in this community.

The Context

The changes which the Diocese are proposing are challenging. This has been taken by some to imply that previous activity has not been as fruitful as we would have hoped, that the priorities might not have been the right ones. It is important to stress that much good work has taken place in the past and continues to take place now. The vision priorities are those which are best for the future, not a reflection on what worked or didn't work in the past. It is important to recognise too that we, like many Churches share a priest and live in an increasingly secular and multi-faith culture.

What is taking place in Lancashire is not out of step with other Diocese around the country, most face similar problems and challenges as the recent document Anecdote to Evidence by the national church spells out clearly. Vision setting is about using our resources more effectively in this setting in order to reverse a tide of decline and marginalisation which our Diocese shares with all others. The broader context is one in which a Diocesan Bishop (not ours) has remarked that, on the present trends, the Church of England in his diocese will slide off the radar in about 10 years if something isn't done to reverse the decline.

The Burning Platform metaphor

The facts on the ground in our diocese show that we are in a serious situation, one that is well described by the image of being on a burning platform. Doing nothing is not an option, neither is soldiering on and keeping things going as they are. We must resist the twin dangers of complacency on the one hand and of pretending that things are better than they are on the other. We at Immanuel share issues which have been highlighted by the Diocesan Synod as affecting the Diocese as a whole including but not limited to

- A continued decrease in Electoral Roll numbers
- A high average age profile of the congregation
- A struggle with finance to maintain buildings
- The continued decrease in the availability of stipendiary clergy
- A change in demographics resulting in increasing numbers from other faith communities
- A sharing in the effects of the rate of decline in church attendance being greater in this diocese than elsewhere in the UK because of previously higher church attendance than was the average in the UK – a sort of ‘catching up’

It is fair to say that the situation is serious and requires radical change. The picture of being on a burning platform might create the right sense of urgency for change. We know that God is the God of the unpredictable, not the God of statistics but I firmly believe that without his intervention the bishop’s statistics tell us that there won’t be a Church of England in this diocese by the year 2050.

The Social context

There are important lessons from our social history in Lancashire. The cotton industry in this town was thriving 100 years ago; this Church was itself built on its profits. However the social and economic challenges of a changing world economy and pattern of trade meant that without change and a reinvention of itself, the industry faced pressures which could only lead to its decline. Change and reinvention did not come and so, as a result, did decline.

Now, apart from a few niche craft islands, the cotton industry has ceased to exist in Lancashire.

A respected academic book about the decline of the Lancashire cotton industry, John Walton’s ‘A Social History of Lancashire’ highlights the reasons for decline;

“The root of the trouble lay in the way the industry was organised and the near impossibility of changing it to meet new needs and problems. An industrial structure that had served Lancashire well during its years of prosperity proved quite unable to adjust to the new stark realities of the 1920’s and 1930’s. Much of cotton Lancashire became custom bound, aging, inward looking and defeatist, as the rising generation failed to respond to the new stresses and new needs. The vast majority of the people on the industry were firmly rooted in their culture, sceptical of innovations and slow to rouse.”

It was the unwillingness to change and adapt that did for the industry, according to the latest research by social and economic historians, not the inevitability, which has been the assumption for its demise in much of past recent thinking. I would say that the same is true for each parish in the Church of England, there is nothing inevitable about decline if change and adaption is chosen; but unless we change and adapt we are done for.

The Sower

One image that Bishop Julian has wisely given us is that of the parable of the sower from Mark 4. Bishop Julian talks of how, in order for the seed of faith to take root it must fall in good soil and so, the preparation of that soil is crucial. The seed must be nurtured by confronting spiritual opposition, addressing spiritual superficiality and by encouraging spiritual loyalty. Part of the Vision 2026 process must then be to heed what the spirit is saying to us about how we sow and nurture the seed in this parish. This must involve planning; to know where we are heading, what it is we are seeking to achieve and how we measure where we are on our journey to get there: What do we want to look like in 2026 and how will we know if we are meeting our targets to get there in, say, 3, 5, 7 years time?

The uncomfortable truth that Bishop Julian is telling us is that this will require radical change, which many will find difficult, not just a few tweaks and minor adjustments. Our priority must be to turning the tide of faith in Jesus Christ in our Diocese and for us specifically here in our parish, in order to transform lives in our community. For this to happen other priorities must be laid down and let go of, if we cling to the past it will drag us down, and we don't have much time.

How might we reinvent ourselves?

1. Making Disciples of Jesus Christ

The words of the liturgy speak of hearts being set on fire with love for Jesus. This kind of spiritual passion needs to be reawakened across not just this parish but also the whole Diocese. We see this kind of passion each week on the terraces of football clubs, although not, perhaps at the moment at Villa Park where, from how I understand it, a singular lesson may be learned from the relegation of a previously great football club; Aston Villa failed to learn that in football, as I believe in the Church, doing nothing will not lead to standing still, it will lead to decline, to stand still you need to keep running, to move forward you need to run increasingly hard.

So what God needs is not better strategies, ideas, programmes buildings or even visions; he needs a more Godly people who are committed to him and to spreading the gospel among those with whom they come into contact, which is where all effective evangelism begins, not in stadiums or rallies. This calls for a wholehearted discipleship, not just attenders for whom the church is little more than a social club.

How can this happen?

Bishop Julian has highlighted three key markers

a. Knowing the Scriptures better: Many people have a willingness to explore their questions and, often doubts, about the scriptures about how they may become an anchor in the pressures of modern life. The Church teaches that without that anchor there will not be a renewal in discipleship. So a renewal of discipleship involves the ministry of preaching and teaching as a key component.

b. Learning to use the gift of intercession: The letter of James rebukes its readers with the word 'you do not have because you do not ask. When you ask you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on pleasures.'

Prayer, corporate and personal is about waiting on God and seeking how we may participate in building his kingdom on earth. A renewing of discipleship means that prayer should be the first thing we do, not something we turn to as a last resort.

c. Giving generously to the cause of Christ: Banging the drum for money only in order to keep the shop open will never work.

2 Corinthians speaks of 'generous giving follows on as a response to the generous grace of God towards us.' Stewardship of time, talents and money as well are successful when they help people to learn for themselves 2 Corinthians 29 'All things come from you and of your own do we give you.'

2. Being Witnesses to Jesus Christ

This happens in all our daily interactions with all with whom we come into contact in both spoken and unspoken ways. If our priorities in life reflect our understanding that the Gospel is not about what we do for God but a responding to what he has already done for us, the gospel will flow out of us like it did with those first Christians in Acts 1:8 who were emboldened by the spirit to be witnesses to the transforming love and power of Jesus. It is important that the message is given that each disciple is a witness. Mission is not just a task for the clergy or even leadership of the church but for 'the whole people of God'. One way in which this may be done is the invitation by the Vision 2026 initiative to each parish to consider a project that identifies and then seeks to meet a local need, which is not being met by others. The motive of this will be to share the compassion of Jesus in order to sow a seed planted in good soil, which may, in time, bear fruit.

3. Growing leaders for Jesus Christ

Patterns of ministry and leadership which may have been effective and appropriate in the past need to be adapted for the very different context of 2016 and beyond. This challenges us to find a new flexibility in Church leadership; a re-equipping of the people of God for a more strongly evangelistic use of all pastoral contacts including baptism, wedding and funeral, to bring those who may be seeking to a commitment to Christ.

Bishop Julian believes that for each local Christian community to grow there must be a pivotal, central figure who provides a stability and continuity of presence when that community meets for worship, prayer and planning. That person must be visible normally each week if the drive for every member of the community to develop their ministry and discern and develop the gifts of the spirit within them. When I was a young boy I went to the Blackpool Tower Ballroom to hear the Great Wurlitzer Organ played by Reginald Dixon. I remember the great Organ coming up out of the floor with Reginald Dixon on the stool. I doubt very much if I would have such a vivid memory of the day if Reginald Dixon himself were not present. This may pose a question for us at Immanuel as it seems to be a reversal of previous thinking!

Instead of reducing the number of leaders and merging parishes in pastoral reorganisation, increasing pressure and workload on an already hard-pressed

leadership we should aim to develop a missional leader in each different sector of the Church's mission, under the umbrella, as it were, of that key central leadership figure.

These 'sector' leaders could include but are not limited to, for example:

a. A youth and children's leader – it is uncomfortable to realise that 48% of Churches within the Diocese have less than five under 16's attending weekly. The job of a youth and children's ministry leader may include making Church life and worship so good for young people and their families that it is the kind of place they would want to come to. It may also involve carefully planning with the overall leader all age worship, which engages with and relates to young people.

b. A missional leader to encourage how we welcome people into Church, with implications for how worship is structured and organised. In the past century most church of England services were changed to become Eucharists; we need to move away from a situation where most services are geared to minister to the faithful and in a new, missional environment, think about how we introduce a new emphasis on the ministry of the word and the spirit.

c. Baptism, wedding and funeral follow up co-ordinator
We need to take more of the opportunity we have in explaining what it means to turn to Christ in the contacts we have through baptisms, weddings and funerals – something is drawing these families to us. This is not an appeal to change the way we do occasional offices, although there is always room for improvement, more of a chance for the whole church to be involved in follow up and for someone to co-ordinate this.

All of the above raises many questions and gives many opportunities and it is not possible to do everything at once. This is why a special PCC away Day will take place to enable the PCC to look into each of these areas more deeply and to discern some priorities. My role in this is to guide and to lead, also to put into effect decisions which are made by the PCC. It is for the whole Church however to engage with and, to the extent that this happens, to make the necessary changes and to move to the next chapter in the life of Immanuel. What I said in my vicar's report last year still stands; we have fantastic opportunities at Immanuel and some wonderful people. I believe that using the tool of Vision 2026 to change what we do and how we do it can unlock even more of this potential and to make this Church stronger, more vibrant and a flourishing place where people will want to come to be part of what God is doing.

That is the challenge.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
April 2016

Dear Friends

I came across recently somewhere a snapshot, admittedly arbitrary and particular but nevertheless revealing, of Christian knowledge, not even belief, in this country. Here it is:

IS THIS A CHRISTIAN COUNTRY?

The Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, not so long ago announced that of the young conscripts entering the Royal Navy:

Only 23 per cent. can say the Lord's Prayer correctly.

Only 72 per cent. know who Christ was.

Only 39 per cent. know where Christ was born.

Only 83 per cent. know what Christmas Day celebrates.

Only 62 per cent, know what Good Friday commemorates.

Only 45 per cent. know about Easter.

Only 2.5 per cent. know about Whitsun.

The snapshot becomes even more revealing when I let you know that I found this in an old parish magazine, not of this church, or even this year; in fact it was taken from a parish magazine from Easter 1951! I wonder what the percentages would be today?

The redoubtable Revd Davies, the vicar who wrote the article, and whom I am sure has long since gone to his rest, gives the following observation to further underline his survey of faith – remember that it comes from a time some of you might remember, a time before television when cinema going was far more widespread than it is today:

FIVE GOOD REASONS

Dr. Hugh Elmer Brown gave five reasons why he does not go to the cinema.

We seem to have heard them before in another connection!

1 I was made to go too often when I was young.

2 Nobody ever spoke to me when I went.

3 When I have gone, I've always been asked for money.

4 The manager never calls at my home.

5 The people who go don't live up to the fine things they see in the pictures

Now bearing in mind that these observations were taken from over 65 years ago, they have a peculiar resonance with today, and the context in which Bishop Julian is rightly calling us to engage in the Diocesan Mission programme Vision 2016. The context may have changed, become even more difficult perhaps, but the fundamental human condition in which it takes place has perhaps not changed that much, if at all.

But the good news is that the message that the Church brings has also not altered. Easter, which I hope we have enjoyed celebrating, means hope, and that hope is exactly the same today as it was in Revd Davies' day, or indeed any day. It is in the context of this, the eternal truth of the hope that can

transform our life and set us free, that the mission will succeed. The truth is that if the Easter hope of our faith doesn't underpin everything that we do in the Vision 2016 initiative, then no matter how professional, slick or well organised we make it, it will lack the one ingredient which will give it life. What is more, that great hope must make the things that we do as a church look and sound different, even though they remain essentially the same things that Christians have been doing for two thousand years. The riches of the past can still speak powerfully today, but only if we fill them with the life of faith. But let the good Revd Davies tell it in his own words, and with an illustration, which, though expressed in the style of the day, makes the point, more clearly than I can:

My dear Parishioners,

This time of the year makes us all feel better. The winter has been long and hard, but the beauty of the spring flowers, the splendour of the trees, and the green lushness of the meadows, bring new hope and joy, and make us feel better.

But the change which the coming of Spring makes in us is small compared with the change produced by the message of Easter. The knowledge that Christ rose from the dead should make an indescribable difference. As an illustration of this influence, let us recall the following true story. Reichel, the great conductor, was rehearsing his choir for a production of the Messiah. The chorus had sung through to the point where the soprano solo takes up the refrain I know that my Redeemer liveth. The technique of the soloist was perfect faultless breathing, accurate notes, splendid enunciation. When the final note died away all eyes turned on Reichel for his look of approval. Instead he silenced the orchestra, walked up to the singer with sorrowful eyes, and said quietly, Do you know that your Redeemer lives, do you? Why, yes, I think, I do, she replied. Then, sing it, the conductor replied, Tell it to me, so that I will know, and all who hear will know that you know the joy and power of it. Then he motioned to the orchestra to play again. This time the soloist sang the truth as she knew it, and had experienced it, and all who heard, wept under the spell of it. The old master approached her with tear-dimmed eyes and said, you do know, for you have told me.

The knowledge of Christ crucified, but risen from the dead, left its mark on her song. We may not be professional singers, but the Resurrection of Jesus Christ should influence our daily task, if we really believe it. We need that influence in our industrial, economic and social life now as never before, if we are to resurrect the greatness of our national life. We have had a long winter, but Easter is with us, and Easter means hope.

WYN DAVIES

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter

March 2016

Dear Friends

To promote the 2014 New York Air Show five members of the US Red Bull Air Force flew, superman style, over the New York skyline using wingsuits, after having jumped from a plane at 7,500 feet! Falling at speeds of up to 120mph, the intrepid five flew for about 2 miles before landing on a narrow barge in the Hudson River, having used parachutes to slow them down. All five landed safely on the barge without ending up in the river. The high tech suits worn by the wingsuited flyers may be seen on YouTube or on page 150ff of this year's 'Ripley's Believe It Or Not' annual, which is where I found out about them. As I understand it the wingsuits add surface to the body giving enough lift when descending to allow forward movement rather than plummeting like a stone – gliding like flying squirrels rather than powered flight would be a good way to imagine it.

What seems as amazing to me as the feat of gliding above the streets of New York unpowered is the apparent simplicity of the design of the suits the skyriders were wearing. Indeed, when I think about it, all the gliding equipment that I can think of, from hanggliders to fixed wing paragliders, to an actual glider itself, it all looks so simple that I can't imagine why it's never been thought of before. Watching all the old silent black and white films of intrepid birdmen with incredibly complicated contraptions usually plummeting to their doom it's hard not to wonder why the simple designs worn by today's gliding enthusiasts were never thought of before. Well one answer is of course that they had been; from the well documented Elmer the Anglo Saxon flying monk of Malmesbury Abbey in 1010 AD to Leonardo Davinci's design for a parachute, like many things in the history of science, the technology and ideas had been around for a long time, it just takes a reason for someone, or more usually a number of someones, each developing the ideas and achievements of those who came before, for those ideas and technology to be put into practice.

When we look at the emergence of any new so called invention it very rarely, if at all, appears out of nowhere dreamed up by one person, it almost always has a backstory.

In the case of unpowered flight and gliding, the revolutionary changes which have allowed men to soar unaided like superman over New York appear to have come in the last few years due to a convergence of advances in the understanding of the physics of flight (lift, thrust, drag etc) and the chemical development of superlightweight materials – both of which were previously unavailable to past generations, although that doesn't seem to have stopped the Elmer, the hangliding anglo saxon monk!

But if most advances in science and technology are, like Isaac Newton said of his ability to see further than anyone previously, the result of being able to "stand on the shoulders of giants", the one huge advance in our relationship with God is not a result of anything which came before, or since for that

matter. When we celebrate Easter we are celebrating something unique which happened once, in one time and place in his tory, which, if we had the ability to travel back in time we could witness for ourselves, done for us, unexpectedly, unsought, undeserved and, at least in the manner of its happening, unpredicted.

The resurrection of Jesus is for Christians the bolt out of the blue when everything changed. It was not the result of the efforts of any predecessors and was not refined or improved on by anything which came after it. For Christians the resurrection is the single most important event in human history. This is because Easter changes how we exist in relation to God – through the resurrection we can approach God directly, not by having to stand on anyone’s shoulders, giants or otherwise. Through that direct experience of God in our lives we can then let God work his will through us, and by his work, transform who we are into who we were meant to be.

That God doesn’t work like human scientific research and development should come as no surprise to us really; whereas humans need to stand on the achievements of previous generations in order to advance should lead us to the conclusion that God doesn’t need to be limited in this way because he is, well, God! Neither should this startlingly unique transformation in our approach to God blind us to our need to hear the experience of others and learn from the riches that previous generations of Christians can bring to help us in our understanding of what God can do through us – we don’t need to reinvent the wheel, many others have grown in their relationship with God before us and we, as mere humans will see further from their shoulders.

What it does mean though is that others can’t do the work for us of growing in our relationship with God and letting his love transform us, we have to do it ourselves. Those brave skydivers who stood at the door of that plane above New York had the benefit of generations of research and testing on their equipment so that they could be assured that it would work. But they were like Christians in one respect, they had to do what I’m sure I could never have done in their situation; no matter how much trust and faith they had that what they were about to do would work, they had, like Christians, to put it into practice for themselves if they were going to experience it personally, in other words they had to jump!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
February 2016

Dear Friends

I have a friend who was telling me recently of how much he had been looking forward to watching, with his young daughter, a film on at Christmas which he had found uproariously funny and entertaining when he had first seen it at her age. He went on to tell me also of his disappointment, not only at his daughter's utter indifference, not to say boredom when she was forced to sit through the said film – but of his own reaction to the film which, whether through maturity of years or the worldliness experience has brought, made it look to him not so much dated as corny to begin with. I'll tell you the name of the film if you ask me!

My own experience of coming across something from years ago happened last summer and was entirely the opposite. Coming across a beach on holiday in Scotland I realised it was the very beach of which I had golden memories from my own younger days. Far from finding it smaller than I remembered or noticing tacky surroundings of which I was oblivious to in youth, the beach seemed to me both bigger and more beautiful than ever, surrounded if anything by countryside more stunning than I had been mature enough to appreciate when last I saw it and, the best bit of all, seeing how my own daughter (who is incidentally the same age as my friend's child) was enjoying tearing round the beach and crashing into the water in an even more enthusiastic way than I had.

Whether this means that my friend was somewhat naïve in his younger days whereas I didn't fully appreciate the wonder surrounding me I don't know. What is certain to me though is that details of an experience of time and place in our memory are perhaps more connected to our memory than to the time and place itself. It's not just that your old school hall will look smaller to you if you see it now than you remember it, it was always that size – it hasn't changed, you have.

It reminds me of a piece of poetry....

'Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place.....'

T.S. Eliot

From 'Ash Wednesday'

I think Eliot means here something similar to what King Saladin meant in the movie Kingdom of Heaven when he was asked what Jerusalem means. He says, "nothing, everything". As in it's really just a patch of worthless dirt, but since so many abstract connotations have been associated with it over time, it now means everything to enough people for it to act as a necessary momentous motive.

'Ash Wednesday is the first long poem written by T. S. Eliot after his 1927 conversion to Anglicanism. Published in 1930, this poem deals with the struggle that ensues when one who has lacked faith in the past strives to move towards God

In Western Christianity, Ash Wednesday marks the first day, or the start of the season of Lent, which begins 40 days prior to Easter (Sundays are not included in the count). Lent is a time when many Christians prepare for Easter by observing a period of fasting, repentance, moderation and spiritual discipline. During some Ash Wednesday services, the minister will lightly rub the sign of the cross with ashes onto the foreheads of worshipers.

Not all Christian churches observe Ash Wednesday or Lent. They are mostly observed by the Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Anglican denominations, and also by Roman Catholics. Eastern Orthodox churches observe Lent or Great Lent, during the 6 weeks or 40 days preceding Palm Sunday with fasting continuing during the Holy Week of Orthodox Easter. Lent for Eastern Orthodox churches begins on Monday (called Clean Monday) and Ash Wednesday is not observed.

The Bible does not mention Ash Wednesday or the custom of Lent, however, the practice of repentance and mourning in ashes is found in 2 Samuel 13:19; Esther 4:1; Job 2:8; Daniel 9:3; and Matthew 11:21.

Lent is a time for changing, and that means that having gone through a time of change, things we had become accustomed to being part of our lives, or places we remember will look different to us as we see them with new eyes. This might mean that some things, which used to satisfy, like my friend's film will, to some extent at least, lose their allure. If we are lucky it might also mean that some things we didn't fully appreciate the first time around will give us a second chance to take in how wonderful they truly are. Like the experience of TS Eliot however, that change may come gradually, and not as fast as we might like. True change is not here today and gone tomorrow and might take time. Yet, journeying, gradually but surely towards God we might sometimes find ourselves surprised by how different things might have become without us noticing. This Lent, I hope that you find a Lenten discipline which leads to true change; and I will remember the prayer I often have to challenge myself with;

'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.'
Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971).

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
January 2016

Dear Friends

Can you solve it? Are you smarter than a German 10-year-old?

A festive question about German concern for the Christmas wishes of the nomadic tribes of north Africa

Every year the German Mathematical Society runs an online puzzle advent calendar for schoolchildren in which a new puzzle appears every day from 1 to 24 December. This fantastic initiative has been going since 2010 and about 150,000 schoolchildren aged 10-16 now take part. On average about 80% get each question correct. Sehr gut, ja?

I like the following question – from the 2010 calendar – and not just because the word “elf” in German means 11.

Waldemar the Elf has a job to do: he must collect all the Christmas wish lists from children who live in the Sahara Desert. Starting in Timbuktu, he is able to complete the round trip and return to Timbuktu in six days. But he is an elf, which means he is very small. An elf can only carry a maximum of four days' worth of elf food. What is the minimum number of elves Waldemar needs to bring with him to complete the trip?

Clarifications: Waldemar can only travel with other elves. Every elf on the trip must eat a day's worth of elf food every day. Elf food is not available to buy during the trip, but elves can give each other food that they have brought with them. No elf is allowed to leave Timbuktu twice, nor be left stranded in the desert with no food.

The solution follows. At the time of writing, still early December due to printing deadlines, some of us are, like Waldemar the elf, very much concerned with Christmas wish lists. At the time of writing, however, due to the devastating effects of Storm Desmond (you may recall), you might be forgiven for thinking that some people's wish lists may be very different from those of the children of the Sarah Desert – Pooley Bridge, for example, at the north end of Ulswater in the Lake District, which dates from the 18th Century and which I have crossed many times, being completely collapsed. In another sense though, those wish lists which comprise just life's basic necessities may have much more in common than those with which I am currently daily being bombarded – in this way the children of the Sahara Desert and those whose homes have been destroyed through no fault of their own, may have more in common than would at first appear.

The New Year, when most people will be reading this, is of course a time to look both forwards and backwards – a bridge in some sense, connecting one set of memories or events, with another. I hope that for you 2015 was a time when your wish list could be like those I am given to send off to Santa and not like those stricken by flood or some other disaster, meaning that life's basic

necessities are all that can be wished for. New Year also reminds us that, whether we consciously make a new resolution or not, we can always make a fresh start – which is a fundamental truth about our faith in Jesus, whenever and wherever we may find ourselves. We can always cross a bridge to something better!

Amidst all the violence, poverty, talk about climate change and refugees with which 2105 may come to be remembered (Oh, and an election, in case you have forgotten!), I was heartened to find some news that cheered me up no end! It seems that some characters you might have thought, and which I certainly did, think, were and for some time had been no longer with us, are still very much still alive, if not perhaps kicking in quite the way they were in their, long past, heyday. If I started this letter with a puzzle, let me end it with a quiz. One feature of the Review of a Year usually includes a list of those who have left us for a better place in the previous twelve months but, how many, would you say, of the following celebrities from yesteryear are still with us at the end of 2105 (at least, at the time of writing!);

Olivia de Havilland (b.1916), Doris Day (b. 1925), Sidney Poitier, Kirk Douglas (b. 1916), Zsa Zsa Gabor (b. 1916), Alan Young (b. 1916, the owner of talking horse Mr Ed), Maureen O'Hara (b. 1920), Dick Van Dyke (b. 1925), Martin Landau and Evie Marie Saint (co-stars of Alfred Hitchcock's 'North by Northwest) and Jerry Lewis? Answers also to follow

Your Friend and vicar

David

The solution.

The answer is two elves.

The solution, explained:

Waldemar cannot complete the trip on his own, because he will run out of food after four days. So he needs to take at least one companion to carry the extra food.

Let's say he takes his best friend, Edeltraud. Both elves start off with four days of food supplies. At the end of the first day, the elves have three days of supplies left each.

Now let Edeltraud give Waldemar a day's supply of food, so Waldemar has four days worth, the maximum he can carry. This means that Edeltraud only has two days worth left.

At the end of the second day, Waldemar will have three days of food left, and Edeltraud has a single day of food. **ELF DISASTER ALERT!** Waldemar does not have enough food to complete the six day trip, and Edeltraud only has a single day of food left so she must return home or remain stranded in the desert with no food.

So, Waldemar must take at least two companions. Let's say he takes Edeltraud and Johannes. They all leave Timbuktu with four days of food each.

At the end of the first day, they all have three days of food left. At this point Johannes gives one day of food to Waldemar and one to Edeltraud, leaving Johannes with only one day of food left and his companions with four each. Johannes then returns home.

At the end of the second day, Waldemar and Edeltraud are down to three days of food each. Edeltraud gives one day of food to Waldemar, meaning he has four days worth of food, enough to finish the trip since he has only four days left to go. Edeltraud, down to two days of food, also has enough food to return home and not be stranded.

So, the trip is possible with Waldemar plus two elves.

The question was originally set in 2010 in a puzzle advent calendar organised by the German Mathematical Society, 80 per cent of the schoolchildren (aged 10-16) who entered got the right answer!

In fact there is an alternative solution: Waldemar starts off with only Edeltraud, who gives him one day of food as above, leaving him with three days of food left at the end of day two. Waldemar has enough food for five days - but on

Answers to Celebrities you thought were dead quiz;

Answer – All of them are happily still with us, except Maureen O’Hara, who sadly passed away on 24 October this year

Vicar's Letter
December 2015

Dear Friends

One of my better attempts at baking this year was a homemade, indeed home designed, lamb and vegetable pie (pictured above). Finding a fridge full of soon to be out of date vegetables and chancing upon an unfeasibly reduced priced premium pack of lamb pieces in Tesco Express, I resolved to blend them together with an inspired choice of herbs and a few spices! So pleased with myself was I by the result that I took the above picture – not I hope out of vanity, more surprise, not least the surprise of my family at how well it had turned out. Looking at the outside of the pie no one would have guessed the

mixture of what was inside, nor how well the combination worked, hence the photograph above, or so I told myself.

Chancing upon an iron age stable in Roman occupied 1 Century Palestine and finding there not only the expected animals but also; an unmarried mother, a man who had abandoned all hope of respectability by choosing to stand by her despite his not being the father of the baby lying in an animals' feeding tray in front of them; a group of bewildered shepherds who didn't really know why they were there; three (at least) exotic foreigners with odd gifts, two welcome and one rather peculiar; a weird star which kept on shifting and stopping in the night sky; oh, not to mention an unpleasant gang of armed militia, sent from a brutal dictator on their way to see the demise of probably the lot of them. What an odd collection of characters. Chancing upon this scene anyone at the time could be forgiven for wondering how the strange collection fitted together, and certainly wouldn't have expected what was on the inside of the stable from its seemingly prosaic outside!

Yet that is the surprising scene with which God arrives on earth! That is the scene which we look at and celebrate with a million cribs and Christmas cards once again this year. That the scene should be surprising should itself perhaps come as not much of a surprise to us since surprise itself, it would appear, is how God works. One of the books which has had one of the biggest formative impacts on me is entitled "God of Surprises" by Fr Gerard Hughes who, in wonderful and often funny pictures and stories teaches us that, where God is concerned, we'd better expect the unexpected, but even more importantly, God will never be confined to what we expect and, if we let him work through us, neither will our lives.

One of the ways in which this can transform us is to find within ourselves, and within other people, unexpected gift and talents, often hidden from the surface, but just waiting to be discovered and have a transforming effect on us and all those around us. I read this week the obituary of a faithful and imaginative Jesuit Priest, like Fr Gerard Hughes, called Fr Joseph Fahey, although he died in 2002. In his obituary Fr Fahey is described as a player of blackjack 'For the greater glory of God', donating all his winnings to the Jesuit Order:

"(Possessing a doctorate in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of technology) Fahey was considered a mathematical prodigy and played the blackjack tables from Atlantic City to La Vegas. Among the sequins, gilt and glitz, he struck an incongruous figure in his blue suit, but he always managed to beat the odds. Blackjack – his chosen game – offers the best odds of any in a casino, but is nonetheless one of the highest earners for casino owners. Fahey, unlike most customers, exploited the possibilities to the full. Ever true to his vow of poverty, Fahey donated tens of thousands of dollars to Jesuit missions and schools, boosting for instance the income of Boston College High School by 500% from 1988 to 1998 and financing an athletics centre, library and computer lab. Fahey's view that God and Mammon were perfectly compatible was not one shared by the casinos however, which eventually blacklisted him. Not to be beaten, Fahey would as Dean of Studies at Holy

Cross College, Mass., give at the end of each term, a lesson for his students on card counting and how to beat the odds at blackjack. The class was always well attended. At the time of his death, Fahey was provincial assistant for finance of the New England province for the Jesuit Order.”

Whilst I am not suggesting that we all take our Christmas Shopping money and see what we can get with it at a supercasino (although if you do, the Church always welcomes donations!!), and have never myself had the remotest interest in gambling, it is interesting to learn what gifts lie within us and how they may be used for God. The thing about using our gifts for God is that in doing so we let God work through us, and we become much more marvellous versions of the people God created us to be as a result – and help others to do the same.

Judging by the way our children unfailingly bankrupt me at monopoly I am sure I would be a complete disaster at blackjack – yet I like to think I may have a hidden talent for baking (although this is sometimes disputed in our household). Whatever talent might lie beneath each one of us it is no use unless it is brought out and nurtured, and this means having the freedom to make mistakes and get things wrong lots of times – only by so doing do we learn to eventually get things right. What we do get right may often come as a surprise, as may its results both for us and for those around us – just as the Christmas scene we celebrate is such a surprise, and contains within itself the biggest surprise there has ever been!

What the nativity tableau can encourage us all to do is to look beyond the surface of our superficial selves and see what surprises we might have within us and learn how to use them. Just like my lamb and vegetable pie, we won't know what's there inside unless we crack it open and see, oh and not forget to bake it properly by coming to Church this Christmas!

Your friend and vicar

David

Fr Joseph Fahey SJ, RIP

Vicar's Letter

October / November 2015

I was interested to learn recently that tourists are now able to traverse a glass walkway on Yuntai mountain in central China's Henan province. The bridge hugs a cliff side 120m (394ft) above a canyon. Officials however closed the walkway, which opened on 20 September, after cracks appeared in the structure on Monday. State broadcaster CCTV reported that a single pane of the 68m-long section shattered into coin-sized segments.

The reason for my interest in the walkway, , along with a natural interest in a fantastic structure (see it at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2015/oct/08/glass-walkway-tourists-enjoy-skywalk-in-central-chinas-henan-province-video>)

is that I recently had an experience of a glass walkway which, in its way was also unnerving. This was on a recent family holiday to London where, on the 'Tower Bridge Experience' my family and I had the pleasure of walking along the upper walkway which connects the two towers. This memorable experience was made all the more memorable by discovering that, previously unknown to me, the floor of the each walkway (there are two, you walk north-south along one and then south north along the other) has been completely replaced by a glass floor, toughened, we were assured, but glass nevertheless!

This means that each visitor walks along a floor while looking down (although its best not to), onto the Roadbridge traffic and River Thames below. Tower Bridge (built 1886–1894) is a combined bascule and suspension bridge and as such is extremely unusual if not unique in being still fully working. Originally intended as a solution to London's mounting volumes of traffic in the 1880's (nothing changes does it?!) it had to allow tall ships access to docks which were further along the Thames than The Tower – its rising cantilevers did just that. So whether you cross up on the glass floor peering to the certain death which would await should one of the panes of glass give way, or else cross

lower down knowing that the 'road' you are walking along can be raised in five minutes' notice, the surface you walk on feels less than rock solid!

"The name of infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of our being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life itself is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist; but otherwise you are not."

--Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of The Foundations*

These are some challenging words from one of my favourite Christian thinkers (which is all theologians really are) from the 20thC. It's really just a distillation of the much more accessible picture that Jesus gives in a wise man building his house on the rock whilst a foolish one builds his house on sand, with no foundations (Matthew 7:24-27)

How many people build lives on sand? How many think they have built their lives on rock only to find, sometimes with a shock akin to mine to see myself walking 65 meters above the River Thames, that what they had thought of as solid ground has, in fact, an enormous and precipitous chasm yawning ominously beneath it? Of course, the lack of solid ground was there all the time, only we get very used to covering it up and pretending it wasn't there – which I must admit was exactly what I was feeling walking along an unexpected and worrisome glass floor, in a structure over 120 year old, wishing someone would put a carpet down.

Let me be clear: I'm not talking about the times in our lives when, for one reason or another, the bottom falls out of our world – those are indeed terrible times and ones in which many have not realised until much later that Our Lord was there with them, only that it was too dark to see him. I'm talking about those times when we realise that what we thought of as the solid basis of our lives is not all that solid after all. Not the times when we might feel as though we are falling down a great hole, but the times when we realise that we could.

Jesus' message to us is clear at those times: whatever it is that we use to carpet over the glass floor that we walk upon needs to come up if we are to have true peace and security; that the gap beneath us will not go away just because we use the temporary distractions of life to cover it up or blindfold ourselves with; that to walk on solid ground we need to base our lives on things that last, that are solid and will give us a true foundation in life.

As I walked over the road under tower Bridge and saw the unforgiving brown waters of the Thames beneath me I said a quiet prayer : not the one you might expect that the bridge would hold (although that would be

understandable), but to give thanks that Jesus is always there to provide a true ground and solid foundation in life – or at least, if we mess it up, a parachute!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
September 2015

Dear Friends,

One of the most enduring hoaxes you might hear in a backpacker hostel is that of the drug-soaked business card: someone hands you their card, and the drug is instantly absorbed by your skin. You fall into a zombie-like state, where you will do anything for your attacker, from empty out your bank account to pull a trigger on someone.

The drug is burandanga, or scopolamine, derived from nightshade plants, and there are countless stories about how criminals in Colombia and Ecuador use the drug, which is said to remove a person's free will, to assault victims or rob them. It is also known as "devil's breath" and has been described as "the most dangerous drug in the world". It's hard to know which are urban myths and which are genuine. The US's Overseas Security Advisory Council warns travellers in Quito about the dangers of falling victim to a scopolamine attack, and refers to "unofficial estimates" – it doesn't say where this figure is from – of 50,000 scopolamine incidents there every year.

Now, according to reports, the drug has been used on "dozens" of victims in Paris, and three people have been arrested. The Daily Telegraph suggests that two women had encouraged their victims to breathe in the drug, then got the victims to take them home where they stole money and jewellery.

The idea that someone could become zombified after someone blows powder into their face is one thing, but does it remove free will? "It would completely zonk you out," says Val Curran, Chief pharmacologist at University College London, "but I don't know about removing free will. It incapacitates you because you'd feel so drowsy, you wouldn't remember what was going on. But you would do after huge doses of alcohol, or lots of other drugs like Valium or other benzodiazepine drugs."

It is one of those drugs with a rich backstory. It is said to be one of the first "truth serums". In the early 20th century, it was administered by some doctors as a pain-relief drug – or rather a drug that led to the forgetting of pain – in childbirth until one obstetrician noticed how women who had been given it

answered candidly to questions; he later wondered if it could be used when questioning people charged with crimes. It was used as evidence in some trials, but dubiously.

A drug which removes free will, a drug which 'zombifies' to the point where the previous personality is eliminated and a person exists perfectly at the command of another. Some people, listening to some versions of Christian proclamation may conclude that if only we could find the effects of such a drug in our imperfect discipleship following Jesus, we would become perfect Christians and always conform to Jesus' will. Personally I think that following Jesus is the opposite; the removal of not just this but of all 'drugs', in the sense of things, habits, patterns of behaviour which we use to shield us from who we really are. Following Jesus is actually rather more about giving drugs up, which is why so many find it so difficult and, in our society at least, why the number of committed Christians is falling.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Professor Rowan Williams describes a Church as being;
"first of all a kind of space, cleared by God through Jesus, in which people may become what God made them to be (God's Sons and Daughters)"

I can think of no better definition of being a Church, and as part of it a Christian, than this. Becoming what God made us to be is not to be controlled by someone else, still less is it about using things to shield us from ourselves or abandoning who we really are, but rather finding, through growing self control, that we are happiest when we are most fully ourselves. As we grow in our faith in Christ, so we grow in our knowledge of ourselves, and we are better people with happier lives as a result

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
August 2015

Dear Friends,

Showing mountain ranges taller than the Pyrenees and gorges three times deeper than the Grand Canyon, this week's images from New Horizons, the flyby space probe currently passing Pluto have re-ignited the debate among astronomers about whether the ninth heavenly body discovered to be orbiting our sun deserves the title 'planet'. Pluto was discovered in 1930 and was

originally considered to be the ninth planet from the Sun. After 1992 however, its status as a planet fell into question following the discovery of several objects of similar size in the Kuiper belt beyond Pluto but still orbiting the sun. In 2005, Eris, which is 27% more massive and further away from the sun than Pluto, was discovered, which led the International Astronomical Union to define the term "planet" formally for the first time the following year. This definition excluded Pluto and reclassified it as a member of the new "dwarf planet" category.

The discoveries made this week however make the debate about Pluto's status as a planet redundant. It no longer matters what we call it, because Pluto is now shown to be the gateway to a hitherto poorly appreciated third zone of our solar system. This third zone was first put forward as an idea by the Irish astronomer Kenneth Edgeworth. As early as 1938, Edgeworth plainly stated that newly discovered Pluto was too small to be a planet, but was probably the largest member of a family of objects that formed out of the rubble left over from the formation of the solar system. These ideas were developed in the 1950s by a Dutch-American astronomer, Gerald Kuiper, and this third zone became known as the Edgeworth-Kuiper Belt, now frequently shortened to the Kuiper Belt.

The first high-resolution images of Pluto this week overturned decades-old theories about these icy worlds beyond Neptune. Scientists were thrilled and somewhat startled to see a mountainous landscape devoid of craters. For years it was widely assumed that the worlds of the Edgeworth-Kuiper Belt were cold and lifeless places. This week we know that is not true. Pluto and its moon, Charon, must have some source of internal heat driving geological processes on the surface. What is more, Pluto is only one of many thousands of objects on which liquid water might exist beneath the surfaces in the Edgeworth-Kuiper Belt, possibly in vast quantities, and where there is water, there will probably be life.

So whether or not Pluto remains a 'dwarf' or a fully-fledged genuine 'planet' is really not the most exciting thing about it. Yet names, or what something is called does, to some extent at least, matter. A child's name can tell us something about his parents — their race, social standing, even their politics. This is not to say that a name is always someone's destiny, or, like Mr Gradgrind in Charles Dickens' 'Hard Times', suggests something of their character, (still less as in Roger Hargreaves' Mr Men and Little Miss series, suggests parents who have the prescience to name their child after its defining characteristic; Mr Messy, Mr Silly, Little Miss Helpful and so on). However there is some evidence to show that a name can influence how a child performs in school and even her career opportunities. Perhaps its only one factor among many, but the act of naming something is certainly to do with influence, power and even ownership.

This is certainly true in the Bible where names are full of meaning. Sometimes a person's name is changed to reflect their changed nature, for example Jacob's name being changed to 'Israel' after his successful all night

wrestling match with an unnamed divine creature, or Cephas being called 'Peter' to reflect the rock on which the Church will be built.

Genesis 2; 20 tells how:

"Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man (Adam) to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field"

This is not to say that over 50 million of the known species were somehow classified by one individual (and in 24 hours at that), but I think something rather deeper. Adam and Eve are presented not as historical figures in the way we would understand history but as 'every woman' and 'every man' since human life began. That just as they show how ultimate standards of good and evil are not theirs to settle, so their status as custodians of the beauty of God's created world is part of their developing relationship with and awareness of God. The naming of the created world speaks less of ownership and mastery than of a duty of stewardship and responsibility to look after what has been given to us.

Surely then Pope Francis is right to draw attention to how climate change is the modern day equivalent of not looking after the Garden of Eden. Surely it is right to play our part in looking after God's wonderful creation even as we find out more of the wonders of his universe. And surely it matters less what we call the ninth identified object currently known to be orbiting our sun than what it teaches us about how our solar system was formed, what might lie beyond it, and how we look after our own bit of God's glory, sorry, 'planet'.

Your friend and vicar,
David

Bless the Lord all you works of the Lord: •
sing his praise and exalt him for ever.

Bless the Lord you heavens: •
sing his praise and exalt him for ever
(From the Benedicite)

Vicar's Letter
July 2015

Dear Friends

A strange experience occurred to me yesterday as I heard not one but two of our children quietly singing a song which goes like this:

“Ch, Ch, Ch, Changes....Turn and face the strange, Changes....” Etc, which, to those of a certain generation like me was immediately recognisable as ‘Changes’ from David Bowie’s 1971 album ‘Hunky Dory’. This is an album of which, back in the day, I could not only list the playing order backwards but would very probably have been able to recite with 100% accuracy every word of every lyric.

What was strange to me was that these same two children, whilst merrily singing the song had not the slightest idea not only which album it came from but, unthinkable to those of us from that certain generation, had not the faintest idea who David Bowie was, or indeed still is! On enquiry it seems to have appeared in an episode of ‘The Simpsons’, a favourite TV show of theirs from which they appear to have gained most of their knowledge of the outside world!

Well, the song struck a chord with me for a different reason; that the life of a vicar, at least in the measure of that I have enjoyed to date, is characterised by the whole issue of change, and how strange introducing that change can sometimes be. There are, it seems, different ways that things are changed. First, there are those things that need changing in a hurry (in the spirit of person and parish preservation) and that have to be made immediately. Then there are those things that need changing in the course of the movement of time and as seasons change. Those are changes that take more time, require consultation and deliberation with a wider gathering. Then there are the Grand Changes that concern whole-parish direction, its mission and vision. Those sorts of changes are brought about with wide consultation and over a longer period of time.

The common characteristic in all matters regarding change is that people seem not to like it. The whole idea of change is not, of course, about the matter at hand. That the Hall WC is that colour or this is of no significance per se, but in parish life nothing (and I mean nothing) is that wasn't put there for a reason (and often by someone long dead).

To move a chair from a place of hazard to a place where it may be sat upon seems like a process of the obvious, until you discover that Mrs Miggins RIP 1942 used to sit in that spot and on the chair she donated. To change locks because seven million copies of the door key exist and are in the hands of nameless masses seems like a sensible thing to do until you discover that someone was given a key by the vicar back in the 20s to let in the reddleman once and therefore has rights to new keys.

People acquire things. People take on little jobs around the place. People, with a good heart, dedicate themselves to things. We ask them to do it. We enable with one hand and disable with another because we have to. What we are not taught in Vicar School is how much people attach significance to things that exceed the original significance. A key to one person is to open a door and an onerous duty, but to another it represents affirmation, authority and even a sense of power. Often, we change things (even through specific need) that people regard as 'theirs', even when they are not.

The lesson I am learning is simple. I must make the changes that are required as it is my role to lead a community from one place to another in all senses. The end result is almost always peaceful, but the liminal space - the moment of transition - is hard for most if not all of us. It is the case that we identify ourselves as who we are in many external things - and in church life at least, those things are the ones oft changed by those whose heavy responsibility it is to bring that change about, and the experience can sometimes be very strange!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
June 2015

Dear Friends

On the wall in my study is a print of Rembrandt's 'The Return of the Prodigal Son'. It's a marvellous painting, completed only two years before the artist's death in 1669 and to me it has almost iconic qualities. It speaks, in other words, of the welcome we will always find when we return to the Lord in humility and repentance. For the prodigal son, you may remember, his partying lifestyle was well and truly over, but it was only then that his real life could begin.

At Pentecost, another party is finally over. The fifty days of the Easter festival come to an end. The word "Pentecost" in Greek means "fifty days" to mark the seven weeks since the Passover feast.

The feast of Pentecost has deep roots that take us way back into the agricultural world of Canaan before the Chosen People entered the Promised Land. Passover itself marked the beginning of the harvest season with the first cutting of the barley crop. The harvest came to an end fifty days later when the wheat harvest was finished; and both the Canaanites and Israelites celebrated this as the Feast of Weeks, seven weeks.

After their entry into the Promised Land, the Israelites took the harvest festivals of Canaan and made them their own. The spring-time fertility festival became Passover and was tied to the exodus from Egypt. The Feast of Weeks fifty days later was tied to God's giving of the Law to Moses on Sinai. And the autumn festival – called the Feast of Tabernacles or Tents – was tied to the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness when they lived in tents. The rhythms of nature were linked to the great events of salvation history. What had begun as Canaanite became Israelite.

But the story of Pentecost does not stop there. Because the early Church took what had become Israelite and made it Christian in another act of re-interpretation, but this time what was being celebrated was the giving of the Holy Spirit; the harvest was not barley and wheat but what the Apostle Paul calls "the fruits of the Spirit" – "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control", Galatians (5:22-23).

The Feast of Weeks was a time of joyful celebration, since God had once again given what was needed for life. In the ancient world, famine was a constant threat, and a good harvest was cause for celebration because it meant the difference between life and death. So too the Christians saw the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as making the difference between eternal life and eternal death.

The Feast of Weeks was also a moment of sharing with the needy the good things of the land, so that no-one went without. And the Christians saw Pentecost as the beginning of a great God-inspired sharing of the fruits of the Spirit with a very needy world. They saw it as the beginning of the Church's mission, as we still do.

That mission continues to this day because God has not ceased to breathe the Holy Spirit into the Church. Without that Spirit, the Church would be a corpse, but with the breath of God within us, the Church becomes the Body of Christ – wounded it is true, but still radiant with the life that is bigger than death, the life of Easter.

At a time when we need to become more missionary, God is breathing the Holy Spirit into us in new ways. It may be that for some of us we may have too much to eat, but famine of a different kind still looms, more than ever in our great abundance. To become more missionary in a culture like this, we may

need to turn away from abundance of one kind to find and share with others a different kind of abundance. We may need to say no to material abundance in order to find and share with others a genuinely spiritual abundance. That was certainly the inspiration of someone like St Francis of Assisi and the example of the current Pope Francis, who took his name. God will always be there, waiting with what we really need for life. The party may be over, but the real work must now begin.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
May 2015

Dear Friends,

I have been reading a book lately by Richard McGuire called 'Here'. Actually, 'reading' isn't quite the right word, for reasons which will become apparent in a moment. 'Here' is the story of a corner of a room. It starts out with a picture, drawn by the author of that corner of the room, with nothing in it but an empty fireplace. The following pages are simply hundreds of similar drawings of that same room, but showing the events which have happened in that space over the course of hundreds of thousands of years. Its not just that 'reading' is not quite the right word for looking at pictures, but that by looking at the pictures the 'reader' is working out for themselves the stories, often interlinked, of the people who stood in that same space over all these years.

'Reading' is one word, 'becoming aware' would do just as well, as would 'recognition'

This month, May, sees the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord, on 14 May, to be precise. This event, whatever it was, is often seen as the way in which we express the sense of Christ Universal, that is to say, of Jesus as not being limited to a particular time or place, but being found and seen in all places and all time. Yes, he did live on earth at a particular time and in a particular place, but our faith is bigger than we will ever understand and contains mysteries beyond our comprehension – or at least, beyond mine – and this is one of them. That Jesus did live in a particular time and place, (the incarnation), and he is at the same time lord of all time and all places (The Ascension). To those who would limit our faith to narrow dogma I would throw that challenge, the mystery of the truth of both the incarnation and the ascension.

I wonder if the 'ascending' part of the Ascension wouldn't more helpfully be understood by thinking in terms of 'becoming aware', or another word might be 'recognising'. 'The Recognition' might be a more clumsy and less elegant phrase than 'The Ascension', but I believe that, at least in part, is what it might be. The recognition that Jesus is present in all places and at all times, if only we had the eyes to recognise him. The recognition therefore that there is nothing which is beyond or more powerful than the love of God and therefore that there is nothing that cannot be redeemed. The recognition also then that it is now, here, in this world, in this room, at this time that we can meet Jesus and experience something of the power of the new life that he brings, the life for which we were created.

On the memorial stone in Ross-on-Wye of Margaret Potter are the following words: 'All the way to heaven is heaven.' Next to it, on the memorial stone of her husband, the brilliant playwright, Dennis Potter, is written this: 'And all of it a kiss.' All the way to heaven is heaven. And all of it a kiss. The present is the only opportunity for union with God which we have. This place, this corner of the room is where it will be found, as it might have been found in this same place by countless unremembered others before us.

The Incarnation and The Ascension are for me then both of the same truth, however dimly I perceive it: that both are a recognition that the divine moment is now, the divine place is here, or 'Here' as my book would have it. So our prayers must then always be from our present, however painful, blissful, hilarious, dull that might be at the moment. We have to be here to recognise the kiss.

"The fact is that if you see the present tense, boy do you see it, and boy can you celebrate it" – Dennis Potter, in his last interview by Melvyn Bragg on March 15 1994. It was broadcast by Channel 4 on April 5 1994. Potter died on June 7 1994

Your Friend and Vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
April 2015

Dear Friends,

This month saw the sad passing of Sir Terry Pratchett, author of over 40 'Diskworld' Fantasy novels, selling more than 85 million books worldwide in 37 languages, who was the UK's best-selling author of the 1990s, and one of my favourite authors. His first Diskworld novel, 'The Colour of Magic' was published in 1983, which was when I first read it. With his trademark leather hat, brown leather jacket and white beard, Sir Terry was instantly recognisable. When he was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease in 2007 he made a large donation to the Alzheimer's Society and allowed many documentary films to be made of how he coped with this awful disease, which have been an inspiration to many whose lives have been affected by it.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the fantasy 'Diskworld', it involves a fictional huge disk floating through space, supported by four enormous elephants, who themselves stand on the back of a giant turtle, Great A' Tuin. If this sounds implausible to us then its worth considering that Sir Terry didn't make it up, but took the picture from beliefs held by many ancient societies and religions before the discoveries of Galileo had spread worldwide. Until the time of Columbus many thought that to sail west across the Atlantic would mean falling off the edge of the world. The Romans though, it seems, knew otherwise. However the action of the stories taking place on the Diskworld could take place anywhere in our own world, and that's the point of the novels; each one is an unbelievable fantastic parody of an aspect of some all too recognisable facet of our own ordinary world.

To make a point, Jesus often made up stories as an illustration – the parables of the Good Samaritan, the Persistent Widow, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son are all not memories of real people and events, but stories made up to make the listener think. That this can further be enhanced by fantasy has a long tradition in English Literature, both written and dramatic; consider 'A Christmas Carol', '1984', 'Peter Pan', 'Shrek', the whole gamut of Walt Disney Studios and the fine tradition going back to Shakespeare's fantasy plays like 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' and 'The Tempest'. To teach a truth a fable doesn't have to be historically real, but its reality comes from the truth of its experience.

It's the same with how we look at people and history. We can meet someone and find out what percentage of their lives they have been employed, married or retired etc. We can measure their height, weight, eye colour and find out a whole range of facts about them. But this tells us nothing of the person they truly are. To truly know someone doesn't only involve statistics or percentages but rather learning of their life in terms of story, relationship, pictures and memories. There are different levels of truth and, like anything worth finding out about, people have many different layers of truth to discover.

So the work of Sir Terry Pratchett, for me, is not diminished by the fact that it is not real. Consider for example these lines from some of his novels:

"Stories of Imagination tend to upset those without one."

"The presence of those seeking truth is infinitely to be preferred to the presence of those who think they've found it.", *Monstrous Regiment*

"It's still magic even if you know how it's done.", *A Hat Full of Sky*

"Goodness is about what you do, not who you pray to.", *Snuff*

"So much Universe, and so little time."

"I'd rather be a rising ape than a falling angel."

"I have no use for people who have learned the limits of the possible."

But what about our own world? What happens in our own world is, by definition, real and not fantasy. Well, for me just because something is not 'fantasy' doesn't mean that it can't be fantastic. Just because something is familiar doesn't mean that it can't yet contain many levels of truth and meaning. As we tell this coming week the familiar story of Jesus' death and resurrection, we are telling a story not about something made up or fantasy but something which really happened on our own earth, in a particular place and at a particular time. What's more it's the most fantastic thing ever to have happened; something that has the power to transform lives, to free minds from everything that would limit them and empower all who come to it to see themselves and the world as a place of previously unimagined opportunity and possibility.

Terry Pratchett's fantasy *Diskworld* is not real but it can teach truths that are real in our own world. Our world is real and the story of Easter can help us see within it, and within ourselves, things that we might never otherwise have thought possible. Easter is a time when we celebrate the triumph of life over death, the triumph of God over sin, and the reality of Christ's risen life in us.

We can prepare for Easter by taking stock of where we are spiritually, emotionally and mentally.

I recently discovered a helpful meditation about the cross, which might help us see within it things which are, well, just 'true'

The horizontal — a reminder
that like Christ I am on a pilgrim journey...
that like Christ I cannot always choose the way...
that like Christ I carry with me a burden I cannot lose...

The vertical — a reminder
that God is always there...
that all I do is in the end to give him glory...
that my journey to heaven must be rooted in the ground...

If my life is really a pilgrimage to God, carrying the weight of myself, it is sensible to abandon unnecessary trifles so as not to be encumbered for I cannot serve God and material things...
to be willing to lay the axe to the root of the tree and be converted,
for to be perfect is to have changed often...
to accept the company of others, their consolation and their help,
for on my own I am powerless...
The road is rough and the falls are many.
God draws me towards himself,
For his love is patient...
my baptism has marked me out for him...
my heart knows no rest until it rests in him.

May you all have a very Holy Easter, following not the wrong path, but being lead in the path of life eternal. Wherever that path may lead you, even if it is to the ends of the earth, remember that you're never going to fall off!

Your friend and vicar

David

Sir Terry Pratchett RIP

Vicar's Letter
March 2015

180 years ago newspaper readers were thrilled by a story about plants, animals and flying men on the Moon. The Great Moon Hoax, as it has become known, was published in the New York Sun over several days in the summer of 1835. It claimed to describe what the astronomer John Herschel had seen through his telescope from the Cape of Good Hope. It was read and, apparently, believed by tens of thousands of people across the US and Europe. It began by admitting that this was “an unusual addition to our journal” but promised it was worth reading, for there had been recent discoveries in Astronomy which will build an “imperishable monument to the age in which we live, and confer upon the present generation of the human race a proud distinction through all future time.”

The first article gave little more away, simply describing Herschel’s telescope. Over the following days, however, the articles included increasingly lavish descriptions of planets, the lunar landscape, “several new specimens of animals” and, ultimately, in the last paragraph of the 6th and final part, the bat-like “Vespertilio-homo”, which appeared “scarcely less lovely than the general representations of angels by the more imaginative schools of painters.”

Those who knew something of scientific matters would be aware that not only was there a Sir John Herschel FRS but also that he was then at the Cape of Good Hope, observing with a large telescope. There was an Edinburgh Journal of Science too, although it had recently folded. Names of real

instrument makers, opticians and astronomers were dropped, the optics of the telescope were described with convincing technical language, and what could be more likely than that the inventor consulted the Board of Longitude? (Except that it, too, had shut down.)

What was the purpose of this elaborate fiction? It has been seen as prefiguring newspaper circulation wars, as demonstrating the gullibility of the public, as early science fiction (along with Edgar Allen Poe, who wrote not dissimilar newspaper pieces), and as a critique of popular science writing. What seems certain is that many did, at least initially, believe these were genuine observations. All becomes clear when we learn that the story was intended as satire rather than hoax. Richard Adams Locke, an apparently well-educated recent British immigrant who wrote for the Sun, eventually came clean in a letter to another newspaper. It was, he said, “an abortive satire”; he was “self-hoaxed” because his mimicry was too accurate to be spotted as parody.

Locke’s target was the widespread and uncritical belief in extra-terrestrial life among men of science. In particular, he took aim at Thomas Dick, a Scottish minister, teacher and author, whose faith in the existence of other worlds appeared throughout his writings and whose books were achieving enormous popularity.

It was this popularity that undid Locke’s satire. People were well prepared to hear that men had been found on the Moon. Some see the Hoax as a case of science versus religion, but this is too simple. It was I think rather a satire on the gullibility with which Locke saw his contemporaries blindly accepting anything they were told, either in the name of science or religion or, in this case, by a popular newspaper.

I wonder have we moved on much since that time? I don’t mean in a philosophical sense of how we perceive the world around us, how we make sense of things that we see or experience. Rather, by what do we measure the truth claims made either in the name of science or religion? I’m not at all qualified to comment on scientific matters, other than to make a general observation that one generation of scientists generally show the previous generation’s understanding of reality as, if not mistaken, then at least incomplete (Einstein showing how Newtonian science is, well, not really how it is, for example; Quantum physics showing how previous physics was, well, not really how it is either). I feel even less qualified to comment on religious definitions of ‘truth’, mainly because I know a bit more about them, and so am more aware of how much more there is about it that I don’t know!

This isn’t meant to imply anything about the torrent of truth claims shortly to be made in the coming weeks by those who want us to vote for them, or their veracity! It’s more to echo what Jesus said to Pilate when Pilate asked if it was true that he was a King, “What is truth?”, in the sense of ‘we all have truths, are mine the same as yours?’ Yes, Jesus is a king, but in a very different way than Pilate understood it. So for me there is no conflict whatsoever in the discoveries made by science and the truths claimed by our

faith, they are both true, but in different ways, or different 'magisterium's' to use a term. Its just like enjoying Christmas day in different ways; eating buttered sprouts and then watching the re-run of the Morecambe and Wise 1977 Christmas Special – or whatever takes your fancy. Enjoying eating and enjoying watching, both are good, especially when its Morecambe and Wise!

Lots of dreadful things are happening in our world today because some people think that their religious 'truth' is so true that any other claim cannot be tolerated. For my part I have always been suspicious of anyone from any faith who claims to have an absolute certainty. If someone says something is true because 'God says it is' that doesn't allow any room for argument. The trouble is that someone else can come along and say something completely different in the name of God too and an implacable impasse is reached which all too frequently leads to some of those dreadful things we have seen in the name of religion recently. I rather think of religious truth as being something to be explored, discovered and learned about in dialogue, listening and learning as we go along. One of my favourite quotes, I have it on my study wall facing my desk, is from someone who was writing about history, but it could equally apply to religion, Christopher Hitchens;

"Those of us who write and study history are accustomed to its approximations and ambiguities. This is why we will never submit to dictation from those who display a fanatical belief in certainty and revelation."

I have been sure to order a 'Je Suis Charlie' badge in support of the murdered Charlie Hebdo journalists' families' appeal.

Incidentally, Scientists are discovering hundreds of earth like planets all the time at the moment, thanks to advances in astronomical technology. Perhaps until proof is eventually found its anyone's guess if life in some form is on one of them, and if it is, what it is like. There may not be Vespertilio-homo on any of them, but whatever is there, God is God there just as much as here. But how would we know if there were Vespertilio-homo, or any other life form on these distant worlds? Well, it would be in the newspaper of course!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
February 2015

I am always pleased when we reach February. It is not that winter is over but as the month progresses the long dark days recede and the promise of spring approaches. There is the hint of better things ahead. February marks a transition from the deadness of winter into and towards the newness of spring. Although variable as to when Easter falls, nevertheless Lent regularly begins

in February. This year as Easter is relatively early about half of this month will be taken up into Lent.

Lent is what is traditionally understood as a penitential season, a time to reflect and amend our lives. In many peoples' minds this has become associated with the giving up of some pleasure. While for some this may be a worthwhile exercise I would suggest that in order to get the most out of lent this will generally not best be achieved by simply giving up something in that way. Instead, what seems to be far better is choosing to do something positive. Here is a chance to take action that will enrich and transform our lives and the lives of others. It may be endeavouring to do a new thing or it may be something familiar that needs rekindling. Amending our lives doesn't have to be miserable.

Paradoxically part of acting positively may include giving up but not in the way I have so far described. What I mean is the positive creating of space and time in our busy lives to read, reflect and do something new with others. The giving up then is the laying aside of something to make space for something better. Among the creative things positively on offer this lent we might make time to read and yes, enjoy the Bible and to think afresh about its core message.

Not everyone finds Bible reading easy. There are many Bible reading notes and booklets which can help in this available either online or from any decent bookshop. If anyone would like any recommendations (or indeed for me to arrange to have one delivered direct to your door) please contact me – I would be only too delighted to help. The Bible is the written Word of God and vital in our knowing Jesus the living Word of God. To grow in our love for Jesus, we need to know him with our hearts as well as with our heads. Enjoy Lent.

Your Friend and Vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
January 2015

Dear Friends

Lose Weight, Volunteer to Help Others, Quit Smoking, Get a Better Education, Get a Better Job, Save Money, Get Fit, Eat Healthy Food, Manage Stress, Manage Debt, Take a Trip, Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle, Drink Less Alcohol. Yes, these are the ('apparently official') top UK New Year's Resolutions from last year. Well, as they say, if the cap fits.....

You will be reading this letter afterwards but, as I write we have yet to experience Christmas; the printer needs my copy before mid December so at

home the lights are not up, the Christmas cards unwritten, the presents still on a list that is studded with question marks, while at church we have yet to decorate, put up the crib, prepare the flowers or complete the lists of people helping at the Christmas services. So, I trust that we have all had a happy Christmas.

There are, it seems, always lots of lists and some of you may by now have a new one with New Year's resolutions; that list of things we plan to do differently in 2015 than in 2014. Some of the items will be new; some will be about doing more of the right things; some will be about doing less of the things that are not so good for us. My friend, who attends a Weight Watchers class, tells me that numbers swell after Boxing Day and that January is the busiest time of year. There is no shortage of helpful advice about what to do next; the advertisers on television have turned their attention from toys, special festive food and drink and brands of exotic perfumes to holiday destinations, January sales and a plethora of health products.

Advertising is a strange thing; one of the ways it works is paradoxically to make us unhappy. A frequent subtext is that our hair is insufficiently glossy (not one of my priorities I have to say) our front rooms not comfortable enough and our feet definitely malodorous, but luckily the solution to our new found misery about ourselves is at hand, we need only to buy the sparkling shampoo, the sumptuous sofa, the sweet smelling sole and all will be well and our lives improved.

If you had to write down five verses from the Bible which encapsulated the Christian message one of the references could be Paul's letter to the Philippians, its message is "Learn to be content" - here it is in its context:

Philippians 4:10-11

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have."

Of course there are many who have little, sometimes less than little, and we should and must continue to give fully of our time and our gifts to help those in real need but many of us are much more fortunate. So, I wonder if we might be counter cultural, do away with the lists and teach ourselves to be content? This is a good first step to a deeper more spiritual way of living, a way of taking the joy, humility and comfort of that first Christmas, to take it from the newness of the Christ child into the newness of the Year.

With blessings and a happy new year to you all,

David

Vicar's Letter
December 2014

Dear Friends

Do you recognise any of these people: Maurice Micklewhite, Norma Jean Mortenson, Reginald Dwight? If you don't the chances are that you will still recognise them by their 'adopted' name: respectively Michael Caine, Marilyn Monroe and Elton John – you can see why they changed their name! Some people might have even more cause to take an adopted name, what about 'do Namscimento Edson Arantes' (Pele) or 'Dzhugashvili Iosif Vissarionovich' (Stalin)

Jesus had many names given to him both during his life and when he came to be more deeply understood by the early Church. Some of the titles that were gradually used in the early Church and then appeared in the New Testament were adopted from the Jewish context of the age, while others were selected to refer to, and underscore his message, mission and teachings. Here are just a few:

Advocate, Almighty, Almighty God, Alpha and Omega, Amen, The Ancient of Days, Anointed, Anointed One, Author, Author of Eternal Salvation, Beginning,, Beginning and the Ending, Begotten, Beloved, Beloved Son, Beloved Son of God,, Blessed of God, Bread of Life, Bridegroom, Bright and Morning Star, Captain of Man's Salvation, Captain of Our Salvation, Carpenter, Carpenter's Son, Chief, Cornerstone, Chosen, Chosen of God, Christ, Christ Child, Christ of God, Christ the, Lamb, Jesus God or Son of God, Jesus Saves, Jesus Facts, Jesus Bible, Jesus Church, Comforter, Consolation of Israel, Cornerstone, Counsellor, Creator, Creator of All, Things, Deliverer, Divine Son, Door of the Sheep, Emmanuel, End of the Law, Endless, Eternal, Eternal Father, Eternal God, Eternal Head, Eternal Judge, Eternal Judge of Quick and Dead, Everlasting Father, Example, Exemplar, Faithful and True, Father, Father of Heaven and Earth, Finisher, Finisher of faith, First and the Last, Firstborn, First fruits, Forerunner, God, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Israel, God of Jacob, God of Thy Father, God of Whole Earth, God's, Anointed, God's Holy Child Jesus, Good Shepherd, Governor, Great I AM, Great, God, Great Shepherd, Head of Every Man, Head of the Body, Head of the Church, Healer, Heir of All Things, Holy, Holy Child, Holy Messiah, Holy One, Holy One of Israel, Holy One of Jacob, I AM, Image of God, Immanuel, Jehovah, Jesus, Jesus,, Christ, Jesus of Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, Joseph's Son, Judge, Judge of Quick and Dead, Just One, Just, The, King, King of Israel, King of Kings, King of Zion/Sion, King of the Jews, Lamb, Lamb of God, Life, the Light of the World, Light, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Living Bread, Living Stone, Living Water, Lord, Lord from Heaven, Lord God, Lord God Almighty, Lord God of Hosts, Lord Jehovah, Lord Jesus, Lord of All, Lord of Dead, Lord of Glory, Lord of Hosts, Lord of Living, Lord of Lords, Lord of the Sabbath, Lord Omnipotent, Lord our Righteousness, Lord's Christ, Maker, Man of Counsel, Man of Holiness, Master ,Mediator, Meek and, Lowly, Messenger of the Covenant, Messiah,

Messias, Mighty God, Mighty One,, Mighty One of Israel, Mighty One of Jacob, Minister, Most High God, Nazarene,, Offspring of David, One Body, Only Begotten, Only Begotten of the Father, Only Begotten Son, Our Passover, Physician, Power of God, Prince, Prince of Life, Prince of Peace, Prophet, Prophet of Nazareth, Propitiation for Sins of Whole,, World, Rabbi, Redeemer, Redeemer of Israel, Redeemer of the World,, Resurrection and the Life, Revealer, Righteous Judge, Righteous Man, Rock, the Rock of Heaven, Root of Jesse, Sacrifice, the, Saviour, Saviour of Israel, Saviour of the World, Second Comforter, Seed of Abraham, Seed of David, Seed of the Woman, Servant of Jehovah, Servant of the Lord, Shepherd, Son, Son of Abraham, Son of David, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of Mary, Son of Righteousness, Son of the Blessed, Son of the Eternal Father, Son of the Everlasting God, Son of the Highest, Son of the Living God, Son of the Most High God, Spiritual Rock, Stem of Jesse,, Teacher Come from God, True Vine, Truth, the, Unchangeable One, Way, the, Well, Beloved, Wisdom of God, Wonderful, Word of Life, Word, the, Worthy.

I wonder if anyone can come up with any more! Each of the titles or 'adopted names' expresses or emphasises something about who Jesus is. In Advent we think of those words about Jesus, which help us to understand what it means to wait for, or to look for his coming among us and to prepare ourselves for that. We usually think of this in two different ways; firstly Jesus coming as a little baby at Christmas and also at the same time remembering that secondly, we wait for Jesus to come at the end of time to judge the world – the first rather unsurprisingly being our preferred option! In biblical language both of these senses of waiting for, or looking for Jesus coming to us are accompanied by great signs and cataclysmic events which point out Jesus' arrival in no uncertain terms; think angelic choirs appearing in the sky, a new star, not to mention fires, earthquakes and the odd war to usher in the end times.

There is a long-standing belief among humans that important events are connected with happenings in the natural world. Such events are often referred to as omens and the Bible happily shares in this. Comets, especially Halley's Comet, have often been assumed to portend some momentous event. The birth or death of someone of importance is often linked with such phenomena. However, as Shakespeare said;

"When beggars die there are no comets seen; The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes." Julius Caesar Act 2, Scene 2.

So it might be more difficult to look for signs of Jesus' coming among us NOW, or presence among us might be a better way of putting it, which is I believe at the heart of the biblical message of Advent. Far from being accompanied by all kinds of fanfare, we might find Jesus, if we pause to look, in the most unlikely of places, or people, just think of this...

'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked,

and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me'. Matthew 25: 36;

A similar point is made by the poems of one of my heroes, G.A. Studdert Kennedy, an Army Chaplain in the First World War, more commonly known as 'Woodbine Willie' who earned the huge respect of ordinary soldiers through his empathy and devotion to them (and the woodbines he gave out to injured and dying soldiers which earned him his 'adopted name', and which were perhaps not the greatest danger those men faced). In the poems he wrote, his theology and teachings simply and powerfully express the 'incarnation' message; that God, in Jesus, not only came among us and will come again one day, but is here NOW, if only we would see.

This one is called 'Indifference':

Indifference, by GA Studdert Kennedy

When Jesus came to Golgotha, they hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham, they simply passed Him by.
They would not hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do,'
And still it rained the winter rain that drenched Him through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall, and cried for Calvary.

As we prepare to celebrate that incarnation throughout Advent again this year, let's keep our eyes open to the people, places and situations where Jesus may be present in our own time. There may not be any comets but we might still be surprised!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
November 2014

Dear Friends,

Arabic: الأرضيَّة الكُرَّة الأرض ، Czech: Země , Danish: Jorden; jordkloden; verden , Dutch: aarde , Estonian: maa , Finnish: maa , French: terre , German: die Erde , Greek: γη , Hungarian: a Föld , Icelandic: jörðin , Indonesian: bumi , Italian: terra, Latin: tellus. These are all how to say 'Earth' in other languages. Ok so I looked it up on yahoo answers and you might have guessed it from the French or Italian but all of these translations share one aspect of our English sense of the word 'Earth'. In each language the word means both the planet we live on AND the ground we walk on. Each language has its own name for our planet but they all have one thing in common. Each is derived from a word meaning 'ground' or 'soil' or sometimes 'creation'. The modern English word 'Earth', for example, is derived from the Germanic 'erde', meaning 'ground'. The roots of all such words date from a time when humankind was unaware that the earth is actually a planet. They signified at that time only the ground beneath our feet.

It fascinates me that the same word can mean both what is below us and something which belongs in the heavens. As we look up we can now see other planets very like our own – actually now quite a lot of Earth – like 'exoplanets' (literally planets beyond our own solar system) thanks to huge advances in astronomical technology in the last twenty years. This is not the place for a consideration of what form life might take on any of these other worlds, as life in some form beyond our own world there must surely be, and where life is, so is God. That can wait for another letter. What I have been thinking about is how we look, as humans, both up and down, to see what is beyond us and also what is within us. I don't just mean this in an astronomical or biological sense. What I mean is how we find God in both the beyond and within.

In the library inside the Vatican there is a painting adorning the ceiling of the quarter given to Philosophy (the other three are; Theology, Literature and Law). The painting is called The School of Athens and depicts a scene, which can never have taken place- a scene in which all the Philosophers of the classical world are gathered together. At their centre, and larger than all the

rest, are possibly the two most influential philosophers; Aristotle and Plato, representing two different ways of thinking. One, Plato, is depicted as pointing up while the other, Aristotle is pointing down.

One way of thinking about reality is to look beyond, another is to look within, at our own experiences. I believe God is to be found in both.

Quite often we look for God in the wrong places. We can search and struggle when all the time he is there staring us in the face, if only we had eyes to see, and this quite often comes from within our own everyday, ordinary lives. The great Christian thinker Paul Tillich called God 'The ground of our being' which for me has been a constant source of growing awareness of God, often looking back at times, people and places I have known and not being aware of God speaking to me through them at the time.

This is how Tillich put it;

"God is not a supernatural entity among other entities. Instead, God is the ground upon which all beings exist. We cannot perceive God as an object which is related to a subject because God precedes (all subjects and objects)"

Another way of putting this is that both Aristotle and Plato show different ways in which God can speak to us. The Earth is both what we walk upon and a celestial sphere floating through space. God is found in both within our own life experience (as we reflect upon them in prayer), and without (which can take many forms; the Bible, Church History, the advice of others, Christian and I believe non Christian, even, in some Churches, a sermon).

For me there can be no doubt that we meet God both beyond ourselves and within ourselves, Jesus showed us so, by coming down from heaven to earth.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
October 2014

Dear Friends,

Are you a fan of riddles, or puzzles or mysteries? I sometimes start a talk by posing three 'riddles', with the answer being three 'objects' in my bag, which I dutifully produce when the correct answer is given. See if you can work them out - the answers appear later in this magazine!

1. What is full of holes but holds water?
2. What gets wetter the more it dries?
3. When I'm full I work and play, when I'm empty I rest all day, what am I?

Come on, you should be able to get the first one at least! Jesus certainly liked riddles and puzzles, often answering a question with another question, and turning what was often a trap not only to wrong foot his opponents, but to teach those who have ears to hear. Think for instance of Matthew 21:23ff; Jesus is being asked by those who are trying to trap him, where his authority comes from, 'humans or God'. If Jesus says 'humans', the Pharisees, who are asking, will say that he is a charlatan, if from God, that he is a blasphemer. Jesus however asks them a question in return; where did they say that the authority of John the Baptist came from, 'humans or God'? If the Pharisees said God, then they would be guilty of putting one of God's prophets to death (which they did), if from humans then they risked the people, who still held John in high regard, turning against them. In fact Jesus is making a powerful point that his authority is indeed from God, and that he is also the answer to any riddle, or indeed puzzle, challenge, problem or seemingly insurmountable obstacle that anyone could ever come across in the whole of life – with Jesus there is always a way through, always an answer.

Often what may seem at the time like an insurmountable obstacle, or indeed a defeat, can with hindsight, seem not only a stage on the way through, but indeed a blessing! Think for instance of the evacuation of the British army at Dunkirk between 27 May and 4 June 1940. At the time Churchill said that, "a colossal military disaster "had occurred, saying "the whole root and core and brain of the British Army" had been stranded at Dunkirk and seemed about to perish or be captured. On 4 June however, in his inspirational 'We shall Fight on the beaches" speech Churchill proclaimed it as a "miracle of deliverance". What at first had seemed, and was, a catastrophic defeat was later seen to be an inspiration to the whole nation, as people pooled their resources and came together in the nation's defence.

One of my favourite stories of defeat being turned to triumph is the story of the battle of Thermopylae. In the year 480BC the disunited Greek city states, before the time of Athens and the great philosophers, playwrights and political traditions of democracy, (which eventually passed on into our culture through the Romans and the enlightenment, making us who we are), faced extinction, before its civilization even got going, by the threat of a huge Persian army led

by King Xerxes. Modern classics scholars put the number of Persians at between 100,000 – 150,000 to about 7,000 Greeks, led by King Leonidas of Sparta; the first time that the Greeks had ever combined in such numbers. In the 19thC the great English scholar JS Mill said that the battle of Thermopylae was more important in ENGLISH history than the Battle of Hastings! The battle was a complete massacre of the Greeks but, and this is the crucial thing, after having faced overwhelming odds, the brave Greeks realised that, after three days that the game was up and King Leonidas, realized that the battle could not be won, but by combining in the future that the war could be, and sent away all the soldiers except his own 300 Spartans. These 300 then fought the Persians until Leonidas and the 300 were all killed. The example of bravery however then led to the very combining of the Greek states that Leonidas knew would defeat the Persians and the Persians were duly

defeated at Sea at Salamis later the following year, so sending Xerxes home and saving not only Greek civilization but with it, the whole of western democratic and free civilization which was passed down to us. The model of our democracy and the freedoms we now enjoy come directly from the thoughts later developed at Athens and which were made possible by Thermopylae, and not the despotic monolithic state represented by Xerxes and the Persian Empire. As the author William Golding said in his famous essay 'The Hot Gates', "way back, and at the hundredth remove, that company (the 300) stood in the right line of history. A little of Leonidas lies in the fact that I can go where I like and write what I like. He contributed to set us free."

A year ago, when we first changed our Church Service times and I was honoured to take responsibility for St Francis as well as having the privilege of being vicar at Immanuel I wrote that we might not get it right first time. We didn't, and we are changing our service times back. When you read this the next Sunday Immanuel Service times will be 9:15am and 10:30am, and I will alternate between the two Churches on consecutive Sundays. I also wrote that the first Sunday the new arrangements came into effect was a bit like D-Day in the Second World War, because it was, in theological terms, the 'Kairos' moment of action. Well, victories take many forms. Thank God that the real D-Day was a success, though not without enormous sacrifice. Things, which at the time don't appear to be a success, like Thermopylae, like Dunkirk, can often lead to quite wholly unexpected, and better outcomes. No one chooses to be in position where two Churches share one vicar. Maybe the last year hasn't been the D-Day we might have hoped for, but it could be our Dunkirk, or even our Thermopylae.

Your Friend and vicar David

Answers to the 'riddles' set in the vicar's letter

1. What is full of holes but holds water? A Sponge
2. What gets wetter the more it dries? A Towel
3. When I'm full I work and play, when I'm empty I rest all day, what am I? A Glove

British troops evacuating Dunkirk's beaches

Vicar's Letter
August and September 2014

Dear Friends

This special vicar's letter will set out why, after consultation with the wardens and the PCC, we have decided to go back to the previous Sunday morning service times of 9:15am for the BCP Communion Service and 10:30am for the Parish Eucharist, Sunday School and Parade Services. This pattern will replace the existing times of 8:30am and 9:30am and will come in into operation on Sunday 5 October. I hope you will read it, as I believe that the changes will be beneficial to the congregation, the worshiping life of the Church and the wider parish.

1. From Sunday 5 October the services every Sunday morning at Immanuel will be at 9:15am and 10:30am. This replaces the existing times of 8:30am and 9:30am and will revert to the times which had existed before September 2013.

2. From Sunday 5 October I will alternate between Immanuel and St Francis, ie I will be at one Church one week for both services and the other Church the next week. This means that I will be present to take both services at Immanuel every other Sunday. When I am not present another person will take the services. This will initially be Revd Peter Hallett but may in time include others and could be lay led. To this end a worship team will be set up with a view to helping lead worship at Immanuel (if you would like to join please contact me!)

There are a number of reasons why this decision has been taken and why I think it will prove beneficial to both Churches:

When the present arrangement came into operation twelve months ago I thought it important for both Churches that I take all the services as the vicar of the Church. This was the overwhelming view of the consultation that we undertook and I think that it was the right decision at the time. However, twelve months on enough time has passed both for Immanuel to be used to me having other responsibilities and for St Francis to get used to me (I nearly said 'to have learned to put up with me!'). You should know that although the way the service times at both Churches are arranged at the moment allow me

to be present at all services at both Churches, there is a sense of rush about it.

As it affects St Francis, for which I also have responsibility, I am not at the moment arriving after the Service starts or leaving before the end, but I am almost doing so. With the current arrangement I can't arrive any earlier at St Francis or, on most Sundays, stay any longer.

With the new arrangement I can not only be present at two services at each Church but fully focus on them, and those who come to them. I know that it's important to have sense of 'go' in what we do but I don't think that's the same thing as 'rush', or being on the last minute!

As regards Immanuel directly, whatever time of service a Church chooses it's going to please some and be inconvenient to others. Having said that, more than a lot of people have said that they find 8:30am and 9:30am too early for them, particularly if they are working families whose working days are full of early (some very – I know!) starts. I hope that a later start will mean that a not too early start may mean that it's easier for everyone to come to Church, no matter what stage of life we find ourselves at. There were certainly more people attending services before September 2013 than since. The new times also mean a proper interval can be had between services to properly finish one service and prepare for another.

The drawback to this of course (which it might not be to some!) is that I will only be at Immanuel every other Sunday, as will also be the case at St Francis. That I will be absent every other week is because my time is shared between two Churches, as it is already, but I think that this new way will be a more effective use of that time for both Churches. I know of some very good vicars ("Why can't we have one then?" I hear you shout!) who work this way with two or more Churches and I have seen it work well. Another side of this coin though is that it will enable a worship team to grow and develop at Immanuel, which, in an age of increased sharing of clergy resources is the only way to grow worship and so nurture the Church. Collaborating with a team is, I am convinced, the way forward in these days of ever decreasing clergy numbers and Immanuel can only become stronger as a result. By the way these are not my own original thoughts (I have very few of those) but those who are both much cleverer and more experienced than me, and with a much wider vision, Bishop Steven Cottrell being one of them

I commend these new arrangements to you and ask for your support in making them work. It may be that some ways of doing things might have to change, while others will remain exactly as they are.

In all of this and in all our life together I think that it's important to remember three things:

One is that a Church is, first and foremost, a group of people; 'ecclesia' in Greek meaning just that, and anything else, from the Church building to service times to who serves the coffee is secondary to that basic tenet. Our

worship is an expression of our life together and we should never be afraid of allowing that life together to change and to grow.

Secondly that the ministry of the church at Immanuel is not the vicar's alone; I have a part, and a distinctive part, to play, but so does everyone else, and we will be most effective when we each play our part as a team. Anyone in secular employment knows this is the case; those who think they are indispensable to any organisation quickly learn otherwise!

Only one thing is essential in any organisation, that each play their part fully in pursuit of a common goal. In our case that goal is the third thing we must remember; that the ministry we share together is in fact Christ's ministry, not ours. God calls us as Christians to join in with the work he is already doing, and it's through us that it is advanced. We would do well to remember that in all our supposed successes or indeed failures, that the work we do at Immanuel demands that we play our part, and give of our best, because it is the Lord's work that we are about;

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

Your friend and vicar
David

Vicar's Letter
July 2014

Dear Friends,

In my Brass Banding days and especially at Brass Band contests, I found myself quite often the 'guest' of another Band, sometimes slipping one band's blazer off and another's straight on. Let me say now that this had less to do

with some outstanding musical ability in me being sought out by many other bands, rather than a shortage of players on the instrument I finished up on, the B flat bass. Nevertheless, despite the fierce competition on the stage between bands at contests, there remained a common sense of being a banding fraternity in which help was always given when needed.

Slipping off one uniform and putting on another is one way of showing a sense of identity with those wearing the same uniform. In a different way I was honoured once in my visit to Guyana, South America, to be given a ceremonial cloak by the Akawaio people, which I wore during one of the meetings of the village I was staying in as a guest. I'll never forget the honour I felt, and humility, at being made an honorary member of a people whose lives were so very different, and much materially poorer, than my own. What we wear says something about who we are and what we do; there's nothing like wearing the clergy collar to bring you up against the reality of your own inadequacies.

At our Confirmation Service on 18 June, Bishop John told a powerful and deeply moving story about clothing, and being vested. The Bishop told us of how he recently attended a meeting in a Mosque of a multi ethnic community group he set up in Burnley years ago, and how this would be his last meeting with them due to his forthcoming retirement. The area the Mosque serves is one of the poorest in the country, the community being composed of Bangladeshi descended families, living in poor housing, and one of the most deprived wards in the whole country. At the end of the meeting the Imam asked Bishop John to take off his jacket, which he did, to be then clothed, vested in the black ceremonial robe of an Imam – an extremely high quality Robe only made in Syria, which would have been very expensive and which that deprived community has raised the money for themselves. They clothed the Bishop in the vestments of the highest office of their faith because, they said, he is a man of God. Which Bishop John certainly is.

This moving and powerful gesture reminds me of a passage in Colossians; "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience...Above all clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" Colossians 3: 12. Perhaps none of us can properly claim to display all of those virtues all the time, I certainly can't! It is in some sense though helpful to see our faith as something we wear, both in its sense of showing something about what we believe, and also because, even though we are all to one extent or another incapable of living up to the ideals of our faith, the idea of being clothed in it frees us from the fear and reality of failure, and gives us permission to try again.

When my lack of say, patience, is exposed by my less than charitable reaction to a tenth request in the last ten minutes to bring something or other to a child's dinner table, I know that despite my lack of it, patience is something I can aspire to, and aspire once more when I don't succeed. The high musical standards, the commitment to practice and to do the best one can for other members of a brass band, or any other musical group, are expressed by the

pride taken in wearing the uniform – even if, despite my best efforts, I can't say I always played every note correctly (and probably hadn't practiced enough to make sure that I did!). Wearing any uniform says something about what we are and what we are trying to do, the wearing of our faith is no different; it's the trying that's important. I can't say that our Band won every Brass Band contest we ever entered, we won very few in fact, but we enjoyed trying.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
June 2014

Dear Friends

June is one of those months in the Church year that, like November and December, sees a lot of things happening one after the other. It is important that everyone who is part of the Church tries to support these as best we can.

On 14 June I will from 10am to 4pm be sat outside Church, (if wet in the porch), underneath a gazebo which will hopefully be providing shelter from the sun, with a selection of homemade cakes and tea and coffee. The vicar's Gift Day has been a big success in the past in raising much needed funds for our Church and, I hope, will be just as successful this year. If we remember that when we make an annual special donation to Church on the gift day, we are only giving back to God a tiny fraction of the abundance he has blessed us with in our lives, then I think that once again we will see a handsome amount raised for the upkeep of our beautiful Church. The Church reflects God's presence in our community and if we remember God's presence in our lives when we make our Gift then we can all advance the work of the Church here in Feniscowles and Pleasington.

On Wednesday 18 June at 7:30pm we have our Confirmation Service at St Francis Church, with the newly Confirmed making their first communions the following Sunday. Once again we have a good number of candidates from Immanuel and it would be good to see families and friends come along to either the Confirmation Service itself or to Church the following Sunday to support them. This year our Confirming Bishop will be Bishop John Goddard, the Bishop of Burnley who is to retire later this year. We all wish Bishop John and his wife Vivienne a long and happy well-earned retirement.

On Saturday 28 June at 2pm we have our Garden Party and Summer Fayre, beginning with the crowning of the new Rose Queen, Millie Ellement at 2pm.

Please do make every effort to come along and join in this happy occasion in the life of our Church. It is a very important source of income for us and so important that we make it a financial success. Even more importantly though, the Fayre is one of those occasions when we can come together as a Church family and enjoy time together showing a welcoming and happy face to the community which our Church serves.

Please do put this date in your diaries/wallplanners/fridge doors etc and bring family and friends along to support it.

Liturgically the Church also celebrates the feasts of Pentecost (8 June), Trinity (15 June) and Corpus Christi (19 June) this month. What these feasts together point to, as the natural end to the Eastertide season, is an outward looking direction in the future life of the Church family.

Just as our June activities at Immanuel are inclusive and outward looking, so those feasts of the Church which run alongside them show a bias towards mission and inclusivity in the future life of the Church after Jesus returns to the Father at the Ascension. The giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost enables and encourages the small group of previously timid and uncertain disciples to become the apostles whose preaching and ministry took the good news of the Kingdom out into all the world. On Trinity Sunday we remember how God is not just found in heaven or in the past but is a living relationship of love in our present lives and world. Corpus Chisti, the foundation of the Holy Communion, reminds us of how we meet this living reality as we meet together in worship and celebration.

Taken together the Church feasts in June point to the outward looking nature of our faith; celebratory, communal and inclusive. Lets all work together to make sure that our own Church events at Immanuel, the Gift Day, the Confirmation and the Garden Party show the same priorities in our life together as God's Church.

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
May 2014

Dear Friends

Most people, even those who have never been to Sunday School know what Noah's Ark looked like. And now a new Hollywood film starring Russell Crowe is showing it as perhaps it has never been seen before! It was a long

pointy wooden ship with a large house built on top – obviously as that's how it was described in the Bible. Except that according to a new book, 'The Ark Before Noah' by Irving Finkel, an archaeologist at the British Museum, the truth which might lie at the root of the Noah myth is that the original Ark might have been round – indeed there may have been many more than one of them!

We have known that the ancient Babylonians had a version of the flood story as it was found preserved on one of their cuneiform (clay) tablets, which was brought to the British Museum in 1872. At the time it caused a great furore among Christian and Jewish scholars as, disturbingly for those at the time who dismissed all other religions out of hand, the Babylonian and Hebrew versions of the Noah story were so closely related, often word for word, that it is impossible that they are not related in a literary sense. Since then other cuneiform (clay) tablets have been found in the Iraqi area, which tell the same story including, recently, one written in 1750 BC, which far predates the writings of either the ancient Babylonians and their parallels in Genesis.

In ancient times and right up to the 19 Century AD the typical way to get around on the rivers of Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) was by Coracle, a round, light, buoyant and thoroughly waterproof basket made small boat which could transport family members and their animals from one side of the Euphrates to the other. There are photographs of coracles being made and standing by the banks of the Mesopotamian rivers from the 1920's. It was this, coracle like craft that the tablet from 1750BC describes. It was almost certainly in crafts like these that the ancient Persians rescued their families and animals in the many times the rivers flooded, as they are still prone to do and which there is lots of historical evidence for. Perhaps one great tsunami like flood, or floods once swept away whole villages and it was this deep seated factor in the history and psychology of the peoples of Mesopotamia which underwent mythological development into how one man can avert not only the forces of nature, but, behind them, the power of God.

Of course Christians believe that one man has also delivered us, and offers the means to ride on top of, if not entirely avoid, the many destructive forces that we face if we are to live in the world. The world that God created contains many powerful forces, which, like the environment, if not used in the right way, have the power to sweep us away. That God did not just create the world but also entered into it himself in the form of his Son, provides us with the means to ride out anything which might harm, threaten or destroy us. The only catch is this; Noah spent twenty years building his ark and was no doubt mocked and ridiculed by those who doubted missed the point of his faithfulness. Accepting the rescue, which Jesus provides us with, and the fullness of life which goes with it, might also lead to some counter cultural decisions we might have to make in our lives.

This might not always have to be seen as leading to misery, sacrifice and po-faced seriousness. It was the philosopher Nietzsche (himself perhaps not quite the most cheerful soul there has ever been), the son of a minister who, expressing concern about how the strict 19thC village German Protestants he

found himself among lived out the Easter message said of them: "His disciples should look more redeemed!"

A visit to many Churches, although I hope not ours, may give ground to this criticism. Many Christians often seem surrounded by an air of heaviness, of a lack of humour and irony about themselves. Not many of us might, like Noah be course, vulgar and drunken (well, maybe a few!), called by God to spend 20 years on a seemingly outrageous project. But however it is that we do live out our faith I hope it might be with an awareness of the power of love and joy that rescues our lives from all that would drag us under and sweep us away and embrace it; and if that sometimes makes us look ridiculous in the eyes of the world, whatever the ark is that God calls each one of us to build, to embrace that as well.

Your friend and vicar David

Vicar's Letter
April 2014

Dear Friends,

As someone whose household is affected more than most by the date of Easter I was certainly interested when I found out how late it falls this year. By this I'm not just alluding to the terms of my employment. Our fridge door has the dates of school holidays from three different schools (one primary school, one secondary and the school my wife teaches at) and the list has been pretty interesting this year. Easter this year is almost as late as it can get, 20 April being only four days before the last permissible date, the earliest being 22 March. This seriously messes up the school holidays and from families I know, childcare arrangements for many other working parents as well. Although more than thirty local education authorities have now fixed a spring holiday for schools in March or April many schools are free to set their own holiday patterns which mark Easter by more than having the two Bank holiday dates off. Should we succumb at all, I wonder, to secular pressure to fix Easter to a particular date merely to make all school terms the same length, or for that matter, to allow industry to co-ordinate the bank holiday calendar to the business cycle?

In fact legislation already stands which allows Easter to be a non-moveable feast in the UK! The Easter Act of 1928 fixed the date of Easter so that it always would fall on the first Sunday after the second Saturday in April. The problem is that a caveat was added to the effect that before the Act could come into effect "regard shall be had to any opinion officially expressed by

any Church or other Christian body.” That, you might imagine, gave a lot of scope to a lot of people and agreement has never been forthcoming.

It might be pointed out that were the UK to fix our own date of Easter then we would be out of synch not only with other countries but with many other Churches within those countries. Well, the fact is that Easter already is celebrated on different days in different countries and Churches. In the west the formula is that Easter should fall on the first Sunday after the first full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox, even though we have that equinox fixed as 21 March, which is not, I am led to believe, quite as astronomically precise as we might think. Easter is however is celebrated on different days by Latin Catholics of the East and a different day again by Orthodox Christians – of whom there are many more than there are Anglicans in the UK! Its not just a matter either of trying to reconcile two different calendars (Julian and Gregorian), some Christians see differences over Easter as part of what constitutes their distinctiveness and essence.

But quite apart from the practical difficulties of trying to agree a common date for Easter I believe there is something more profound at stake. Should Christianity, especially in the west and especially in this country so much on the wane, further distance itself from the rest of society, allow itself to become a sub-culture for like-minded believers? Should it instead look at how it might more engage with that society and not be afraid to change how it does things in an effort to remain relevant and meaningful to modern society? Should it, in other words, move with the times in relation to the date of Easter or anything else? Or rather should the Churches, as I myself am more incline to think, not be afraid to stand against the tide, not water down what we offer to a needy and often desperate world and offer, as far as we are able to, not stones but bread, and living bread at that.

The problem with trying to accommodate the veneer of modern materialism is that it keeps changing. How many times, and in how many different ways would the church have to change its ways of ‘being church’ if it were to try and accommodate every passing fad and fancy? The fact that Easter is fixed with reference to both the solar and lunar calendars keeps us in touch with something more rooted than what is here today and gone tomorrow.

Part of the richness of human existence comes from interaction with rhythmic cycles, over which we have no control. There is the cycle of the seasons with its subtle variations (we had no snow this year but next year, who knows?). There is the cycle of our body clock, which regulates our metabolism and different kinds of sleep in line with the pattern of our days. There is the cycle of the moon itself, which controls tides, and a gravitational force, which affects much else. There is the liturgical Church calendar, which combines the mystery of eternity with a linear process of history. Easter is part of that rhythmical cycle and to fix it according to the whims of schools, industry or parliament would seem to me to diminish part of the richness of that cycle which provides structure and rootedness in a world of uncertainty, disorder and displacement.

So let the school holidays fall where it suits the bureaucrats best – whatever chaos it might cause on our fridge door, just don't let them attempt to regulate the mysteries of eternity. Some things, even moveable feasts, are better left unchanged!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
March 2014

Dear Friends

And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence

So go the familiar lyrics of Simon and Garfunkle's timeless classic song, 'The Sounds of Silence'. Silence is one thing that many stressful people long for and many lonely people fear. As we approach the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday I hope that far from fearing silence we actually make some time for it on our daily lives, and in the silence, listen to God speaking to us.

In a Church we often struggle to reconcile two basic human longings. One is for community, with all its energy and messiness, the need for fellowship, affirmation and recognition by others whom we value. The other, equally fundamental, human need is for stillness in an ever more noisy and distracted world. Its often hard to bring both these things together but I don't believe the way to do it is to have some services to appeal to the quieter 'contemplative' personality types and others to appeal to the noisier sort. Rather I think that we all have both these needs within us and that our church life, just as in our daily needs, leaves us impoverished if we don't have a healthy balance between the two.

We can see this in the example of Jesus who, in his constant need to go away on his own to pray and in his fellowship with those regarded as outcasts by the more 'respectable' type, shows that life may contain both feasting and

fasting. At one point Jesus is praying alone away from everyone while at another he is accused of being a “glutton and a drunkard”! While there may be for some of us a natural affinity to one way or the other (work out for yourself which one is yours!!) Jesus challenges us to regard silence, and especially silence before God, to be treated not at all as the preserve of a certain personality type, still less an evasion of the world around us but to recognise that any activity we do on behalf of God, ie ‘mission’ it must be recognised first and foremost as GOD’S activity. So, for any activity to be done in God’s name we must see this as something we are participating in WITH God, that it is something in which he is already at work. Before we act for God we must first discern how and where God is at work – and then we can join in.

At the centre of our lives together as God’s Church for me is the Eucharist. It is in the Eucharist that the worship we offer is moved beyond words (which is why the first part of our service is called ‘the ministry of the word’ and the second, held in balance, is ‘the ministry of the sacrament’ – both are as necessary as the other), it is where the walls between our world and God’s perspective are, for me, paper thin. It is also there to remind us that any discipleship begins with God’s activity, not our own. What other response can there be to such a mystery other than the silence of awe and wonder, to be still and silent in the presence of God and see our lives in a new perspective?

Anyone who has seen the awe and wonder on children’s faces when they are gripped by something which speaks meaningfully to them will know that silent wonder is just as important in the nurture of spirituality in children and young people as it is in adults. Jesus challenges us all to include children and young people just as he welcomed children to come to him when the disciples began to stop them. The silent wonder of the Eucharist is not just for adults; unplug them from their video games for a moment and we know what capacity for wonder and silent awe children have too.

In one moving episode of the popular TV series, ‘Call the Midwife’ (popular with my wife at least), set in the 1950’s in the east End of London, the midwives join with the nuns who run the midwife services in that area of London. The women are together because one of the midwives has herself been taken to hospital with complications arising from her own labour and there is great fear for both the mother and child. After some words have been spoken there is a silence as, together, midwives and nuns knit and sew together the quilt they have all been making for the new family – not knowing if it will ever be used. The narrator, one of the midwives speaking years later reflects that the silence was all the prayer that was needed, the silence and the making of the quilt were together the prayer. I’ll let you watch the episode yourselves to see how the prayer was answered.

As we begin Lent we have an opportunity to make our prayers more than acts of penitence and self-denial, important though these are. We have an opportunity to place ourselves in silence before God, not to retreat from the world that God has placed us in but to see more honestly and clearly how we

can move on in our lives to more effectively participate in God's mission of generous, transforming love.

Your friend and Vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
February 2014

Dear Friends,

If I were to put one of my twins on a rocket and blast him into space on a long journey and at great speed it is a fact that he would return to earth younger than his twin sister. This idea was first put forward by Albert Einstein in his Special Theory of Relativity and is called 'gravitational time dilation'. It is based on the discovery by Einstein that time, gravity and acceleration are all interrelated and has been proved true by particle accelerators such as the CERN in Switzerland. Why this is true and how it works is, alas, beyond me but, like many things in creation, it just is; space and time are related whether we understand it or not. To give a specific example, if the travelling twin were to journey to the nearest neighbouring star system to our solar system (approximately 4 light years away) at a rate of 80% of the speed of light the round trip would take 10 years (because it 80% not 100% the speed of light) from the perspective of the twin remaining on Earth. However from the perspective of the travelling twin the trip would take him only six years (look on Wikipedia the 'twins paradox'); so if the twins are born on the day the spaceship leaves, and one goes on the journey while the other stays on Earth, they will meet again when the traveller is 6 years old and the stay-at-home twin is 10 years old.

This fact of the universe in which we live would have been totally incomprehensible to any scientist before Einstein (as I must say it still is to me!) whose model of the universe was essentially that of a machine, as proposed by Sir Isaac Newton. In Newton's idea of the universe there were unbreakable laws which remained the same wherever you were and however you travelled. Newton would have expected the travelling twin to have been ten years old from a space journey which took ten years, since Einstein we now know that this is not so.

Tempted though I am at times, if I had the means, to put Einstein's theory to the test, there is a great deal else that we might know and have yet to discover about the creation in which we live. The fact that I can't understand it or lack the imagination to grasp it doesn't make it any less real. What we can

actually 'know' comes in many different forms: In one sense, knowledge is simply an encounter with something or someone. We can say we 'know' our friend or neighbour, partner or (sometimes) child. What we mean is that we have a 'feel' for who he or she is. But when we come to describe them to someone else we might say that they are 'quiet' or 'loud', 'lively' (hopefully, or it's opposite maybe) or friendly. We would however soon become frustrated that these general terms don't quite adequately sum up the person we 'know' and if continually questioned say something like "Look, you'll just have to meet her", words failing to describe the sense of uniqueness our knowledge of that other person provides.

Yet 'knowing' someone personally still doesn't give us the complete picture of that person. There is another kind of knowledge that comes from putting things together from bits. This is the knowledge of what we call 'facts'. So we could begin to build up a pen portrait of the person we are trying to describe; 'she was born on 16 September 1964', say, or 'she lived for the first three and a half years of her life at 66 Gas Street', 'she worked at Boots for ten years' etc. But this kind of knowledge is also incomplete; it can never really convey a sense of what the person is really 'like'.

These two kinds of knowledge are referred to by different words in different languages; Latin - Cognoscere and Sapere, French – Connaitre and Savoir. One is about trying to understand, the other about amassing knowledge. Both sorts of knowledge are needed I would maintain, to try to comprehend the wonder of the universe. You wouldn't, for example want to describe the colour blue as 'the point where electromagnetic waves scatter at 0.46um degrees'. You wouldn't reduce music to its component notes and mathematical structure. Rather we would try to imagine a magnificent sky or sing, in my case less than perfectly, a catchy tune. When the poet William Blake was asked once when he saw a sunset, did he not see merely a ball of fire about the size of a golden guinea, he replied, "Oh no, I see a multitude of the heavenly host crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty.'"

That is the point where I part company with the work of such 'new atheist' scientists as Richard Dawkins and Stephen Hawking. I am absolutely fascinated by their ability to describe to those like me with a less than adequate understanding, how the universe works, but I don't remain in thrall to the factual mechanistic way of understanding what it is, true though that may be. For me the universe is so much more wonderful. If we limit our understanding of knowledge to just what facts we may amass we will not perceive the reality and the presence of God. If reality is only viewed in mechanistic factual terms then it will be literally insignificant, ie it won't point beyond itself, it won't signify anything, and if it doesn't point beyond itself it will be literally pointless and therefore always only disappoint.

The discovery of the twins paradox and other wonders of the universe way beyond my understanding is never for me either pointless or disappointing (even if at times the lack of opportunity to put it to the test may be!), but full of wonder, a thirst to discover more and ultimately, like Blake, praise.

Your friend and Vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
January 2014

Dear Friends

When someone does a full day's work, and receives a fair day's pay for their time, that is a WAGE.

When someone competes with one opponent or many, and receives a trophy for their performance, that is a PRIZE.

When someone receives appropriate recognition for long service, or for major achievements, then that's an AWARD.

But when someone is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award, yet receives one anyway - that is unmerited favour. It's how a loving parent encourages and affirms a child who is more often in trouble than top of the class.

And above all this is how - Christians believe - God treats all of us, though we often fall very far short of how he would like us to live. It's what we mean when we talk about the GRACE of God. Most people know the opening words of John Newton's famous song.. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!" We can never earn his grace and favour, and yet we are loved and forgiven, we are granted acceptance and peace, and hope and purpose, because he loves us anyway.

And Christmas is when we see this truth brought to life. The Bible tells us that God loves us so much that he GAVE his own Son. This is THE WHOLE POINT of Christmas. We celebrate the birth of Jesus, for here is "the one who came from God, full of grace and truth, to live among us" (John 1.14).

But there's also a major challenge to be faced. The latest research tells us that most people say, "The birth of Jesus is irrelevant to my Christmas." It is suggested by among others former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey, that we have reached a critical tipping point. The leader of one major mission agency has suggested, "Our society is trying to airbrush Christ out of Christmas." Apparently only 10% of adults say the most important thing about Christmas is 'religious meaning', and 36% of children aged 5-7 don't know whose birthday we celebrate on 25 December. No wonder Lord Carey says he thinks the Church is just one generation away from extinction.

However, we have a chance to buck the trend

One of my favourite stories about a school nativity service is of the little boy who wanted to play the part of Joseph. He was very disappointed to be given instead the part of the innkeeper, but he appeared to accept his teacher's decision and got on with his part in the play. However, on the day of the performance, in front of a school hall packed with parents, the boy took his revenge. When Joseph and Mary asked him if there was any room in his inn, he abandoned the script, stood back so that the door to the inn was wide open and said, "yes, there's plenty of room: come on in!"

That might not be the way the familiar story goes but I think the little boy's actions have some things to say to us at this time of year. We all are invited to 'come in' to greet the holy child, born into such very humble surroundings. All are welcomed! God welcomes each and every one of us. He does not want anyone to be turned away, because He loves each of us so much. God has shown the depth of that love in His unique gift to us; the gift of His Son, born as one of us, part of a loving human family; the One who was willing ultimately to give his life for us, so that we might share in his life, for ever.

At this time of year there is always a great sense of anticipation and of hope. We have anticipated the celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas, not only because it was a great excuse for a bit of a party, but also because his birth gives us hope. Hope for the future. Hope in the midst of much that seems to be changing all around us. Our Christmas celebrations lead into celebrations of the New Year, with a heightened sense of anticipation for all that 2014 might bring. Many will be praying that the next year will be better than the last; others will be going into the New Year with a deep sense of anxiety and uncertainty. However we approach 2014, we should remember the wonderful promise, which Jesus made to us: 'remember that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time' (Matthew 28, verse 20). Jesus promises to be there with us in whatever it is that life brings; in the happy times and in the sadnesses; in the pain and also in the joy.

St John's Gospel tells us, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son'. We make a fuss of celebrating Jesus' birth because we are celebrating the truth of God's love for each and every one of us, God himself living as one of us, experiencing life, with all its joys and pains, and ultimately giving his life for us on the cross.

When we begin to reflect on all of that, then we will understand something of why it is so important to make some space in our own lives to celebrate 'The Birth'. God invites us to come in because He has made sure that there is room for us all. Lets make sure that we make room for God in our lives in 2014, because I'm convinced that the more room we manage to make for him in our lives, the more we realise just how much room he has made, and makes, for us

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
December 2013

Dear Friends

I know that Christmas is approaching when I catch the sound of Dean Martin singing "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, everywhere you go..." and then noticing that he's right! Once again we find ourselves in the Holiday Season, that very special time of year when we join with our loved ones in sharing centuries old traditions, a particular favourite of mine being trying to find a parking space at the Trafford Centre. We traditionally do this in my family by driving in circles near to an entrance until we see a shopper emerge and then follow her, very much in the same spirit as the Three Wise Men who, 2000 years ago, also followed something for week after week until, eventually, it led them to a parking space!

In fact I absolutely love Christmas and can't get enough of the traditions it brings, from decorating the house with more lights than the Blackpool Illuminations to eating chocolate at 5am after being woken up by someone jumping on the bed shouting 'He's Been!' (I love chocolate even though I have a son who hates it!!)

I remember as a boy sitting at the Christmas dinner table pulling Christmas crackers and taking turns reading out the jokes – some people might say that's where a lot of my jokes come from. I remember going round shops asking for first this, then that and after the other as well – and making lists of presents I hoped to get. Although I'll never forget my first Scalextric, the funny thing is that I can't seem to remember the details of many of the other presents, just the weeks of anticipation and the writing of lists. When we get older we might remember the odd present we were given, but more often than not our memories come from the people we spent Christmas with, and the laughter, games and traditions we shared with them. My clearest memories are of us all packed around the Christmas dinner table – all loved ones together. Perhaps the greatest gifts are not the ones most appreciated at the time, and that certainly is true of the greatest gift there has ever been, the reason we celebrate Christmas at all, the gift of the incarnation.

What I also remember on the Christmas Dinner plate, and certainly a tradition in our family is.....brussels sprouts. Yes, lovely round, green soft sprouts, coated with butter and in a big pile, along with turkey, stuffing and cranberry sauce, yummm!!! But sprouts are a funny vegetable, something you either love or hate, like marmite, for every person who loves them there's probably another nine who think, Ughhh. So at Christmas everyone had to have at least one sprout on their dinner plate, even if it was always the last thing rolling round in a sea of gravy on my brothers plate – after he'd unsuccessfully attempted to hide it under his mashed potato (people have different tastes,

think of chocolate in our family). 'Eat your greens', my mum used to say, 'and you'll grow up tall, strong and they'll keep you regular!' I'd like to think that sprouts for me are responsible for two of these at least!

However we celebrate Christmas, I hope we remember that Jesus came into the world, which is what we are really celebrating, not to be an afterthought, like a brussels sprout which might only get a look in after the turkey and potatoes on our Christmas dinner plate have all gone. Jesus came to give hope to a hopeless world, and to sooth the wounded in a world with too much hurt. The Bible says "Taste and see that the Lord is good" and that's not just for those with a taste for Brussels Sprouts either.

May God bless you anew this Christmas and, however you spend it, spare a thought for those who will not be enjoying the traditions you love. Perhaps one way of expressing this care might be to make an extra donation (perhaps just two instead of one item) in the Blackburn Food Bank collecting box – only probably best not make it brussels sprouts!

With every blessing for a joyful Christmas and a happy and prosperous new year

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
November 2013

Dear Friends

I was fascinated to learn recently of a discovery in Georgia of five human skulls dating back over 1.8 million years ago; they are the earliest examples of the homo species (a species of which we homo-sapiens are part of) to be found outside Africa. The skulls, along with stone tools and artefacts found with them suggest striking differences in appearance within the same species, just like we found today, and suggests that what have up till now been held to be several varieties of the species homo were actually all part of the same sub-species, homo erectus. As a keen student of human origins I will follow this story with interest.

The finds also confirm the growing awareness among scientists and especially Geneticists, that evolution, far from being an even and gradual process works rather in sudden jumps and, in the context of the long periods of time involved, rather abrupt changes. As conditions on the earth changed often

relatively quickly, so also life adapted quickly to the changed conditions around it, or at least the life that survived. The 99.9% of all species which have ever lived on this earth and are now extinct show what happens when life doesn't, or can't, adapt.

So also it seems that we have had a lot of changes rather quickly in the last few weeks in our Churches. Saturday 19th October saw the inauguration of Rt Revd Julian Henderson as our new Bishop of Blackburn in Blackburn Cathedral. I hope that we will all pray for Bishop Julian as he begins his new Ministry in the Diocese which, we must remember includes not only the town of Blackburn but almost all of Lancashire, with many varied and many challenging parishes and communities. Bishop Julian will I am sure bring vision and energy to addressing the many challenges facing Churches not only in this Diocese but across the country. Bishop Julian didn't waste any time before visiting our cluster of parishes as, on Monday 21st October he Licensed Revd Cath Brooks as the new priest for St Luke's and St Aidan's. As with Bishop Julian we send Cath our very best wishes as she begins her ministry and assure her of our prayers. Despite the formalities of titles Cath and I have been given, Cath's ministry is for St Luke's and St Aidan's and mine is at Immanuel and St Francis (anything linking me with St Aidan's is a formal title only while the old United Benefice of St Aidan and St Francis is dissolved – although I have many friends at St Aidan's I think I have quite enough to do!!). Which brings me to the third change, which is still relatively new, the new ministry I have begun at St Francis, and the changes in patterns of worship which have taken place to allow this to happen. Although it is still very early in the new relationship, I feel that things are working well and are heading in the right direction. With continued good will on all sides there is no reason why this may not continue to be so.

Its easy to look back, from our human perspective and see not only changes in human history but the whole of evolution as leading to us sitting watching Downton Abbey with a glass of wine in front of a nice fire or in a centrally heated room. The Neanderthals or the 99.9% of all other species which have died out, may not share our perspective! But as Christians I do believe that we should try to understand the words of St Paul in Romans 8: 28, "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." It's not always easy, let alone possible to see this in every situation we might find ourselves in, but somehow, and in some way we can perhaps only ever catch glimpses of, I believe that it's true.

Your Friend and vicar David

Vicar's Letter
October 2013

Dear Friends,

In my diary the page for Sunday 8th September this year is headed 'D-Day'! By this I certainly don't intend any disrespect for the bravery of those who took part in the Normandy Landings of 6th June 1944 (of which two of my great uncles, one still alive(!) were participants.) The term D-Day is not actually exclusively used for that momentous event, but is the day (along with H-Hour) on which a combat attack or operation is to be initiated. Combat attacks notwithstanding the date of 8th September 2013 is certainly important for Immanuel - although seen in proper proportion to the Battle of Normandy we see it in its true lesser perspective. Sunday 8th September 2013 though was the date when Immanuel changed its service times to 8:30am and 9:30am and, for the first time in its history, shared its vicar with another Church.

I must say that I feel extremely grateful to everyone at Immanuel for the helpful and supportive way in which you have approached this very big change, and particularly for the support given in it to me. What is more I am very grateful to all the members of the congregation who have changed Sunday morning routines and adopted the new pattern. At the time of writing there has been no one at all who has turned up at Church at the old service times - at which I am totally amazed (when we changed service times in my old parishes in Wigan someone turned up at the wrong time at least every Sunday for the first month - and one occasion six months after the changes were first made!)

We are still at the very beginning of the new arrangement, called a 'Plurality' with St Francis but so far, I have to say, so good. I pray that the excellent spirit in which we have begun this sharing arrangement may continue and bear fruit guided by God, and pray for discernment of the path he continues to guide us on.

These changes are not the only changes we will see at Immanuel in the near future, hopefully before the next magazine comes out. When we received the very generous legacy of £20,000 last year from the late Glenys Jones, the PCC rightly decided to use it for mission in doing work we would not be otherwise able to do. Accordingly on Tuesday 1st October work will begin in the Church Porch not only on long needed redecoration of walls and ceiling, but renovating the notice board and putting in a new lighting system. This will give to all who enter our lovely Church the rightful first impressions of a building that is loved, valued and cared for, reflecting the value we give to our faith. In this way the work in the porch will be a deeply mission - orientated endeavour and a fine use of the gift we were blessed with. Along with this work the Buildings Committee designed and the Diocese have approved a new Church sign to replace the existing one with updated information and a better notice cabinet that won't leak and serve to advertise the good work done here. Not only that but the Car park signs, both long overdue for replacement are to be replaced, giving visitors and parishioners alike the sense that we cherish and value the property we have been given stewardship of, and of what that property stands for. Finally, as if that wasn't

enough, lots of work has been taking place renovating and repairing the Cottage in readiness for new tenants who bring much needed revenue to our Church in rent. I have been given some old photo's of the cottage in former years and although space prevents me from publishing them in this edition, I hope to share these with you in the next. On D-Day plus 21 I am sure we are heading in the right direction!

Your friend and Vicar David

Vicar's Letter
September 2013

Dear Friends,

I read recently (Church Times 16.8.13) that a judge in Tennessee has ordered that a baby's first name be changed from 'Messiah' to 'Martin' on the grounds that the name could put the baby 'at odds with a lot of people and at this point he has no choice what his name is..The Messiah is a title, and it's a title that has only been earned by one person, and that person is Jesus Christ.' The baby's mother is appealing the ruling!

Quite apart from observing that, following the time honoured Monty Python formula when the child gets told off ('He's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy!') the name could indeed cause the child problems, and that I would have thought the name Martin should not be without resonance in Tennessee (Dr King), the story raises many interesting issues for me. These are not to do with strange baptismal names I have known (although I have known a few!). They are not either to do with the rights of parents versus the rights of children (although that is also something which raises many questions in our society). Rather it spoke to me of how we make assumptions based on superficial information and of where the limits of freedom lie.

Whenever we come to a time of change and decision, as societies, as individuals, the choices we make say something about our values. It's alright to say we believe in something but its when we are called to put that belief into action that it will really be tested. When none of the choices we face are ideal but instead are between least worse options our way forward may seem clouded and uncertain. The freedom we give ourselves at such times and the willingness to look beneath what is on the surface show what we really hold to be central in our lives. We don't for example know the motives behind the parents' decision to name their son in the way they did, I suspect the judge is on dodgy Biblical and theological ground if he maintains that Jesus had to earn his titles and the last time I looked the gospels show Jesus being called Messiah when he too was a baby!

Sometimes in other words we don't have the whole picture and, like the judge, we have to decide between competing rights (both in the sense of what people are due and the opposite of that which is wrong) and make a decision based on what we think is best. The mother has the right to appeal the judge's decision and the judge, as the one with authority is the one who has to decide - and bear the responsibility for the decision. As a Church, Immanuel is to have new Services times from Sunday 8th September because I am also now vicar (sic) of St Francis Feniscliffe. The times of our new services are 8:30am and 9:30am which I will always be at when I am not on holiday. I will also take the one service at St Francis on Sundays at 11am. I think that this arrangement is the fairest outcome in a situation where our two Churches have to share one priest, and that it is both manageable in terms of time and sustainable.

I commend it to you and ask you to support it and make it work (I have recently been given a copy of the Church Magazine from June 1953 on the front of which I note that the early Service then, Holy Communion, started at 8am - which gives me an extra half hour in bed than Revd Porteus had, and I'll bet he had no central heating or lovely shower!). All of us are constrained to some degree or another by the rights of others, it's what makes our society civilised. I would rather live in a country where the strong did not have absolute freedom than one where the weak have no rights. I also believe that Jesus said something similar.

Your friend and Vicar David

David

Vicar's Letter
August 2013

Dear Friends,

Do you ever feel a slight sense of misgiving whenever an 'expert' is brought on to the TV or radio to pronounce about something? I have a wonderful book to which I constantly repair whenever I feel that some expert or other is pushing me in a certain direction; its called 'The Experts Speak And Get it Wrong!' It's a collection of actual words said by those in the know that perhaps they wish, well, that they had never said. Here are just a few of them;

'The Phonograph..is not of any commercial value' - Thomas Edison, 1880
'That's an amazing invention, but who would ever want to use one?' -
Rutherford B. Hayes, President of the USA after participating in a trial
telephone conversation between Washington and Philadelphia 1876

'Radio has no future' - Lord Kelvin, British mathematician and physicist,
President of the Royal Society 1897

'Video won't be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night' - Darryl F. Zanuck (head of 20th Century Fox Studios) 1946

'There is not the slightest indication that atomic energy will ever be obtainable. It would mean that the atom would have to be shattered at will' - Albert Einstein 1932

It heartens me that such disastrously inaccurate predictions were made by those with what would be assumed to have been the greatest foresight. It confirms my view of history that nothing is ever inevitable, fixed or unquestionable. In a wise view of history Karl Marx said that 'men do make their own choices in history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.' It shows that whatever or whoever we are there can always be hope, that people are not doomed to follow one path in life or another and that as our faith teaches us, nothing and no-one is ever beyond redemption. Another way of putting this is as one of my favourite authors, George Eliot said, 'Its' never too late to become what we might have been' - that for me is a deeply Christian truth, even though it came from a deeply agnostic writer.

We all know that our Church is going through a time of change, and as you read this the precise shape of that change will become clearer. I'm not going to write here again of how change is inevitable as I have already done that. I'm not either going to pretend to be one of those so called experts who stand up and say with certainty exactly what the right course of action is - if Einstein can get it wrong about Nuclear Fusion what hope have I got? All I will promise is that whatever changes are implemented they will be after prayer, reflection and a will to produce the fairest and best outcome in the circumstances we find ourselves. I don't pretend to be an expert and I certainly don't have a crystal ball (and if I did I wouldn't trust it!). We may not even get things right first time and, if we don't, we should not be afraid to say so and change them.

In his seminal song 'The Times They Are A-Changing' Bob Dylan sings, "Come Mothers and fathers throughout the land, and don't criticise what you can't understand", which perhaps applies to all of us faced with the uncertainty and the unpredictable and unknowable nature of change and the future. Instead we would do well to commit to God the future he holds out for us and work together and with him to build the great future that remains unwritten

Your friend and Vicar,

David

Vicar's Letter

July 2013

Dear Friends,

In this issue of the magazine on page 7 appears the following notice;

Revd David Roscoe, Priest in Charge of Immanuel Feniscowles, has also been appointed to the post of Associate Priest in the Benefice of St Aidan's, Mill Hill and St Francis Fenisccliffe but with responsibility for St Francis. David will remain Priest in Charge of Immanuel Feniscowles. Within the current benefice of St Francis and St Aidan, he will take pastoral responsibility for St Francis. David's Licensing will take place at St Francis on Wednesday 7th August at 10:30am by Rt Revd John Goddard, Bishop of Burnley. All are warmly invited to attend.

What this means is that from 7th August I will once again be running two Churches, as I did in Wigan for over eight and a half years. While I have hugely enjoyed having one Church to concentrate all my efforts on I, like all of us, must accept the facts of the world we live in, not how we would like it to be. Whatever image we choose, fighting against the tide coming in, making water run uphill and the like, we must accept that change has to come and the best outcomes will be achieved by working with that change.

I will still remain Priest In Charge of Immanuel but as well I will be 'Associate Priest' at St Francis, (actually I'll go on calling myself Vicar because everyone knows what one of those is, and the standards people rightly expect from one). My title will be Associate Priest in the current United Benefice of St Aidan Mill Hill and St Francis Fenisccliffe but, that is only because it still is a United Benefice and my role will be limited to St Francis alone within that Benefice, I will have no responsibility for St Aidan, that should be understood very clearly. The current United Benefice of St Aidan and St Mark is being dissolved; St Aidan's are going to form a new United Benefice with St Luke's, for which the new Vicar's job is currently being advertised, that new Vicar will live in St Aidan's Vicarage in Mill Hill. When the St Aidan / St Francis United Benefice is dissolved I will then become 'Priest In Charge' of St Francis, in plurality with my current job as Priest in Charge of Immanuel. It is hoped that we can then set up a new United Benefice of Immanuel and St Francis and when that happens my title will change again to become Vicar of the new United Benefice.

All of these title changes are for the future, what we face in the present is the need to find a way of working with me running two Churches, Immanuel and St Francis, so that both may grow in discipleship and reflect the love of God in their respective parishes. This will obviously entail some changes at Immanuel and these will be made clear when they are going to happen. Evolution teaches us that only creatures which have the ability to adapt to their environments survive, the dinosaurs could not adapt so they, like 99% of all the species of life that have ever existed on Earth, died out. Being a Church in this day and age is not easy, but I truly believe that its not

impossible either. It will involve making changes but those changes will mean our survival. The only thing which doesn't change is something which isn't alive. Ask the dinosaurs!

So I ask your prayers, not only for me as I take up my new responsibilities and do what I think necessary for the health of both Churches, but for all the people who are involved and affected, that it may be for all of us a time of renewal, opportunity and growth into the future God has waiting for us

David

Vicar's Letter

June 2013

Dear Friends,

Once when I was at University I set out to our local branch of Sainsbury's with the sole intention of buying a jar of coffee, as my current jar had ran out. Entering Sainsbury's (it could have been any supermarket, I used that particular emporium as it was the closest) I was enticed to buy some apples (which I had forgotten that I also needed), some chocolate hob nobs (how else could you get through an essay on St Augustine of Hippo), some milk, which I knew would be a heavy weight but again, absolutely necessary and I believe from memory enough other items to fill three of Sainsbury's best plastic bags - which, to give them their due, did their job and lasted all the way back to my rooms. It was only when I was back in my rooms and began making that longed for cup of coffee that I realised that, you've guessed it, the one thing I had not bought which I needed was, yes, a jar of coffee!

Well, apart from my forgetfulness and distractedness this story has always for me highlighted the way that we can allow ourselves to become too easily sidetracked, take our eye off the ball, go off at a tangent - call it what you will. This is I believe as much true in life in general as it is in Sainsbury's! We all know how the world can be both an exciting and wonderful place and at other times in our lives an uncomfortable place to live. From the earliest times humankind has set out on a religious quest or spiritual search, so that life and death may take on some significance or meaning. Out of this the world's religions have emerged. One thing I remember from my chocolate hob nob accompanied reading of St Augustine is that he said this;

“Lord you have made us for Yourself,
and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”

Perhaps its that we do all get easily distracted from where our true home is, and where our true needs are met, that we find restlessness as well as rest in life. Perhaps that jar of coffee that we set off to find is forgotten too easily and our journey through life changes from the destination we aimed at when we set off. Broadly speaking there are two main traditions within the world's

religions - both of which I can see represented in Christianity (and for all I know in other religions as well, although I am not qualified to speak of them). One accepts the essential goodness of the physical world but tries to change the parts of it that are wrong or broken. The other sees reality at its truest as essentially spiritual and seeks to free us from bondage to pale imitations of what is most real. Both of these elements I can see in both Catholic and Protestant traditions - and from what I know of Orthodox too. I personally see myself as somewhere in the middle (in true Anglican style) and would go further by affirming the truth of something Mahatma Gandhi said;

“Religion is not alien to us. it is always within us: with some consciously; with others, unconsciously. But it is always there.”

It's not a unredeemable catastrophe when we lose our way in life and take our eyes off what would bring us truest fulfilment and happiness because, like the prodigal Son we can always return. Religion is not about vainly trying to keep ourselves undefiled and somehow 'clean' of the world. Rather I see it as enabling us to remember that the jar of coffee we set out for is still there on the supermarket shelves waiting for us to go back and pick it up - only we would have saved ourselves a lot of hassle if we had just remembered what we set out for in the first place. I think I can remember that it started to rain just after I set out back to Sainsbury's for the second time, the sun had been shining the first !

David

Vicar's Letter
May 2013

Dear Friends,

When Europeans and North Americans first began to catalogue the ruined Mayan cities of Central America in the early 19th Century, they were astonished to discover that they were not the first white men to have set eyes upon them. The soldiers and priests of the Spanish Conquest, pre-eminently among them Bishop Diego de Landa, had stumbled upon many sites over 250 years earlier and had compiled exhaustive records of Mayan religion and culture which, on the assumption that these astonishing buildings could not possibly owe their creation to the indigenous population, who were seen as incapable savages, were then neatly filed away in European libraries and forgotten about. In the intervening years all sorts of rumours and myths arose as to the origin of wonders such as the Palace of the Mayan Governors at Uxal, Yucatan . Among these it was held that, the indigenous tribes, being savages and so could not possibly be responsible, the mysterious temples and pyramids of Central America were the work of, in turn, Egyptians,,

Phoenicians, Canaanites, Carthaginians, Greeks, Scythians, Swedes, Welsh - or the lost tribe of the house of Israel, take your pick!

Gradually it became clear that, far from being the work of any of this disparate group, the wonderful Mayan monuments and cities were indeed produced by none other than the Mayans themselves, whose society, religion and culture, to say nothing of their science and engineering, were far more sophisticated than anyone had ever realised. The Mayans were different to the Europeans but they had intelligence, heritage, structured society and religion - it was just expressed in a different way. Yes, they practiced human sacrifice - but this was at the same time as the Spanish Inquisition was burning people at the stake, just before the burning of the English Martyrs, 75 years before the execution of the Pendle 'witches', and many Centuries before the time when many more millions of people than there ever were were Mayans were led to their systematic deaths at Auschwitz, Belsen and Treblinka. When one culture sees only barbarity in another because of differences it is usually blind to the barbarity within itself.

These thoughts sprung to mind for me this week reading of the revulsion felt by all faiths at the dreadful bombings in Boston, coming as they do after many such acts of bigoted terrorism. I have been fortunate to experience the cultures of not only southern Central America but also India, China (for a short time) oh, and Lancashire too! What these experiences have taught is that people are more alike than you might think. We all, and in our increasingly pluralistic society its becoming ever more diverse at home, express our beliefs and values differently, but scratch below the surface and we find that we're not that different after all.

Above all it has taught me that we should always be open to the possibility of change and achievement, in others and in ourselves. To write off a culture as incapable and savage clearly says more about the almost comical assumptions of those dismissing an entire civilisation. Equally to write off any possibility in others or ourselves before we give it a chance is to my mind equally as blinkered and surely quite the opposite of what the lesson of Pentecost demonstrates; that change, transformation and wonderful things are always possible to those who put their assumptions and prejudices aside, and look at what is in front of them. It might be different but its no less valuable for that

David

Dear Friends,

Recently, a man well into his 90's eagerly accepted Richard Branson's gift of a trip into space on the Virgin Atlantic Shuttle when it makes its inaugural flight. The intrepid Nonagenarian is James Lovelock, a renowned scientist who thought up the theory of 'Gaia' when he first saw the earth from space courtesy of the Apollo astronauts. Lovelock described this moment as a revelation as he saw the earth as a single living organism, a 'living planet'. Lovelock first formulated the Gaia hypothesis during the 1960s as a result of work for NASA concerned with detecting life on Mars. The Gaia hypothesis proposes that living and non-living parts of the Earth form a complex interacting system that can be thought of as a single organism.

Last week, we enjoyed hosting the National farmers' Union Ladies Choral Evensong at Immanuel (pictures on the website at immanuelfeniscowles.org). I said at the service how, although not coming from a farming background myself, quite the opposite in fact, I have greatly come to value and respect the work of the farming community in its role of managing the countryside. This means harnessing the natural power of creation and husbanding it in particular ways as directed by the farmer. As we look around our landscape most, if not all, of what we see has been crafted by human endeavor. This is achieved not by working against the forces of nature but harnessing their natural power and channeling it in a particular direction.

The concept of working with a power greater than our comprehension or ability to control is, of course, nothing new to Christians. The power of God, just as the power of nature, is there, I believe, whether people choose to accept it or not. Ignore both and life becomes extremely perilous. Work against either and you're doomed from the start. God gives us power to choose our path in life, he did not create us to be puppets, neither did he create us to be automata, meekly submitting to his will, as if the purpose of life was nothing other than to seek his will and obey - he's not some kind of celestial Jabba the Hut (Star Wars reference). Instead I see God as being like the force of nature, giving power to our plans and making them germinate, but working in a particular direction over which we have no control - that direction being our wellbeing. At Easter time we see just how powerful the life-giving force of God is. As Hamlet said in Act 5 Scene 2 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough hew them how we will'

This April sees the retirement from their current roles at Immanuel of two people who have, I can see, given exemplary service to the Church as they have walked the path that God has asked of them and have made that path their own. Ken Winterburn and Peter Hodgkinson will shortly step down from their current roles and I want to say a huge thank you to them both for all they have given to this Church and, particularly, for their untiring help to me! I know that Ken and Peter will continue to find new ways of putting that life-giving force of God into practice and ask God to bless them in all their work in his name. I hope that this Easter we all too can find new ways of rough hewing the great gift of creation that God holds out and offers to us.

Happy Easter - David

Vicar's Letter
March 2013

Dear Friends,

Like many families we have recently enjoyed watching the twenty fifth James Bond film 'Skyfall', possibly, and you are welcome to disagree with me, the most action packed of the lot! Born two years after the first James Bond film was released I can't remember a time when James was not jumping out of planes, driving cars underwater or escaping from impossible situations usually contrived by super cool villains, embodied for me by Donald Pleasance. Did you know that there have been six actors who played James Bond in the second highest grossing franchise of all time after Harry Potter - and highest when inflation adjusted? They are Sean Connery, David Niven, George Lazenby, Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, Pierce Brosnan and Daniel Craig (alright I know that's officially seven, but you can't really count David Niven, can you?)

Usually James winds up in front of the Donald Pleasance character saying something like, "And I suppose you expect me to talk, you villainous scum?" To which comes the reply, "No, Mr Bond, I expect you to die!" and "Take him away and see that some harm comes to him!" Of course, even if we haven't seen the ending we know that, while harm may indeed come to Mr Bond, he will certainly not die. In fact he will overcome all obstacles, however unlikely and spectacular, and not only escape, but defeat his evil enemy and destroy the fiendish empire which threatens the world!

As we approach the Easter Story in our Lenten readings in Church and through the drama of Holy Week, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we of course know the outcome of our drama. Although everyone thinks that Jesus' life has been futile and ending in defeat, actually, for those with eyes to see, it ends in complete victory over all evil. But whereas James Bond will go on to face yet another, (the twenty sixth) malicious threat to world safety, Jesus has won the final, ultimate victory. The resurrection of Christ means that no sinister looking Russian sounding dandy stroking a cat, no difficulty we might face in our own life, however bleak that might appear at the time, no abyss so dark we might find ourselves staring into at some time - none of these things are more powerful than Jesus. He has, in the words of St Paul, 'put all things under him', and all we need to do is to have faith, or rather, try to have faith, in him and that power to overcome all obstacles can be ours too.

That doesn't mean that we should go around triumphantly pretending that pain, sadness, defeat or anger are not part of our life, because we know only

too well that they are, or if they are not yet, they will be. Neither does it mean that we only offer the medicine of faith to those we know who are in dark times, rather than get alongside them and share their pain. But what it does mean that this Easter, just as all Easters, assure us that our hope is, well, 'not in vain'. The truth of this story is our inspiration and the fundamental core of our faith. This Easter let's open ourselves up anew to be stirred by this story, and not shaken by life!

Your friend and vicar

David

Vicar's Letter
February 2013

Dear Friends,

If someone asked you what has been the most important event in your life, what would you say? It might be something good or it might be something bad. It could involve things beyond your control or it might be a conscious decision you have made. Whatever it might be, the most important thing in your life would have been something which gave direction, purpose and drove other elements in your life.

Historians sometimes see turning points in history. Sometimes these are great battles like Trafalgar or Waterloo (and I love the 'counterfactual' history books which imagine what might have happened if events had turned out differently at, say, D Day or Hastings, and which are held in such disdain in fashionable historical circles). Sometimes turning points happen over many years but change the world utterly like the Industrial Revolution or the change from pre-history to modern, recorded history during the Iron Age. These great social movements involve not single individuals but shifts in patterns of work, trade and innovation which affects the lives of everyone.

For Christians the greatest event in history is the life on Earth of Jesus. In Jesus we see the one and only time that God has appeared on Earth. We see not God in human form, but God, pure and simple. We see what God does, which is to give utterly that we might have life. This happened once in history, at a specific place and time. It had never happened before and it will never happen again until the end of time. It happened once and once only and, if we have the faith to see it, it changes everything.

For those with faith the fact of Jesus can change life at an individual level too, by making us more the people that God created us to be. We should never then be afraid of change, because if we are in control of it, it can mean changing things for the better. To ignore change, or to try to pretend that

change does not come is like King Canute ordering the waves to turn back - they won't, and if he continued to sit there on his throne all that would happen is that he would get wet, no matter how many proclamations he made.

Of course you will have realised by now that I am talking about change and about turning points because that is what we face at Immanuel in the coming months as we face the changes of how Churches in this area are going to be linked together. This will happen whether we like it or not. The worst we can do is to stick our heads in the sand and pretend it won't happen, because it will and it would be remiss of me not to point this out to you. The best we can do is to embrace this change and in it discern something of God's work, to let it change not just us but how we live as a Christian Community. We see this all the time in history, that although the past can be looked back on with nostalgia and even celebrated, those who have eyes to see know that the best is yet to come.

Your Friend and Vicar, David

Vicar's Letter
January 2013

Dear Friends,

No doubt by now, as you read this, there might have been one or two more paracetamols or alcha-selza's taken by some of you than would normally be the case. I don't mean to suggest that anyone might have over-done it, but Christmas has been known to lead to an increase in the taking of pain-killers or things to soothe that which has been unsettled. This seems more than a little ironic to me, as Christmas, the incarnation, is about the coming into the world of the very thing which has the biggest power ever to unsettle! It's about the thing which will not only end in the pain of rejection and execution but opens up all those who follow to a life if not of guaranteed pain then at least an openness to the possibility of it. At the beginning of the journey of Bilbo Baggins in Tolkien's 'The Hobbit', brilliantly (in my view) adapted to the screen, Gandolph the Wizard, in answer to Bilbo's request for the certainty of a safe return from the journey, says to Bilbo that he can guarantee no such thing and, furthermore, says that should Bilbo return, he will not be the same as he was when he set out.

Perhaps its not just at Christmas time that we in the west seek to dose ourselves up and try to avoid the possibility of pain. C.S.Lewis once described pain as 'God's Megaphone', shouting out above the noise with which we try to surround ourselves to avoid his uncomfortable, unsettling maybe, challenges. Once upon a time I used to play rugby, League and Union (actually I played one to a higher standard than the other, but I'll leave

you to guess which that was). I was told that if there's one thing certain in playing rugby, as opposed to shouting advice from the touchline, its that you're going to get hurt. The thing is that I found that while that was certainly true, it was worth it. I once scored a try of which I was very proud, I'll not bore you with the details other than to say it was not half as important as I thought of it at the time, but I wouldn't be without the experience (or at least it would take a lot for me to be without it). It was, as I'm sure you've guessed I'm going to say, worth the pain. The thing is, I can't remember feeling the pain now, but I can certainly remember putting the ball down over the line.

Actually someone who goes through life trying to avoid painful experiences at all costs is not only a coward, but in their cowardice is missing out on the richness of life's experiences. God does not, I am certain, want us to be like The Happy Prince in Oscar Wilde's marvellous fable, he wants us to experience the life he has given us in all its fullness.

If anyone seriously believes that we at Immanuel can go through the next twelve months without feeling any pain at all then I suggest that they misunderstand what a Church is. A Church is a place which helps us to grow in our relationship with God in and through our relationships with other members of God's family. That family will be widened in the coming months to include a closer relationship with our friends in the neighbouring Churches. I have never met a family yet which agrees all the time on everything, certainly not my own and I'd bet not yours either - but we are a family just the same. We might need a few more paracetamols from time to time in the coming months, but let's not take too many!

Your friend and Vicar, David

Vicar's Letter
December 2012

Dear Friends,

I have on my shelves in the Vicarage study a jar of coins. Now this jar is not there because of any theological significance or as a souvenir of an important time or experience in my life. Its simply where I tip all the loose change in my pocket at the end of each day and so is a useful place to turn when change is quickly needed - as it always seems to be in our home.

The jar does remind me of one of my stock in trade school assemblies or all age talks. It goes like this. First I explain what the jar is, as I have just done. Then I ask about four or five volunteers to come out and to try to guess the exact amount of money in the jar. Of course none of them ever gets it right (this relies of course on my having counted, or saying that I've counted, the money in the jar previously!). Next I invite all the children to shout out their

guess of how much the coins come to. When the cacophony has died down I explain that its almost impossible to guess the right answer and that its quite a waste of time counting them out anyway as that's not what the purpose of the jar is. Incidentally I always ask if anyone did get the right answer and, wouldn't you know it, there is always some Smart Alec who did, or says he did, or she did.

Some things in life we are bound to get wrong, and its usually frustrating when we do. Some times this might be in an exam or a relationship or maybe a choice, even a life changing one. We might remember some striking examples of people who have been wrong, like the several publishers who turned down the first Harry Potter Book when JK Rowling was initially seeking to have it published, or Albert Einstein's teachers who asked him to leave school because, as they now infamously said, he would 'never amount to anything'!!!

The important thing to remember is that we are all human, and that means that we are going to make mistakes. If we set ourselves the unattainable target of always being right, or perfect, then we are eventually going to be very disappointed. The key to life is to use our mistakes to learn from because, as the American poet Maya Angelou put it, unless we learn form the past, we are condemned to repeat it forever. What's more, I could waste time counting up all the coins in my jar and arrive at an exactly right answer, but that would be just one thing, and how much more of life would I miss by such pedantry, life is just too short for it to be always perfect.

God gave his Son to us not that because of him we could become perfect, but precisely because he knows that we are not, and never can be. The more we try to make Christ the foundation of our lives the better our lives will be, but we all fall short of what is perfect, and the Good News is that we don't have to be. At Christmas time we remember that just as the Jewish people of God were waiting for a Messiah to come and rescue them from their own imperfections which had led them into a dead end, so Christ will come to each one of us to rescue us from our dead ends. What's more he'll turn us round and show us the way to go to a better, happier and more fulfilled life, (a 'Wonderful Life' perhaps, well it is Christmas). This Christmas lets take the chance to marvel at the miracle of God coming into his own world and invite him afresh into ours. We might not get everything we want, we might not get everything right, but we will be much nearer both of them - and who cares if we are a few pence out of the precisely correct total.

With every Blessing for a Joyous Christmas and a Peaceful New Year.....David

Vicar's Letter
November 2012

Dear Friends,

I wonder if you have ever heard the fable of the Powerful Prince and the Peasant Girl? Basically it goes like this: There was once a very beautiful but very poor peasant girl who, though she enjoyed nothing more than dancing and singing, had to work hard in the fields all day. Far away there was a very powerful prince who, passing by the peasant girl's field one day, saw the beauty of the girl and fell instantly in love with her. Back in his powerful castle the rich prince decided that he would go to ask the peasant girl to marry him. Just to make sure he made a good impression, he donned his finest regalia, jewellery and armour and was about to set off. Suddenly a thought struck him; how would he know if the peasant girl really loved him in return, she might just be impressed or even frightened into saying she loved him by his fine robes. Yet, if he didn't wear the finery he possessed he might risk losing the girl he loved. He decided to take a risk. He took off all his fine robes, armour and jewels and dressed as a peasant himself for, if he was going to know if the girl truly loved him for who he was and not what he was, he must take the risk or being rejected. He approached the girl dressed as a peasant and the girl saw him, he held her hands and told her of his love and she....., well the rest is up to you. Did she return his love or was he rejected?

When God showed himself on earth he did not come with all the heavenly hosts and with great triumph. Quite the contrary, he was born, as 'Jesus Christ Superstar' has it "in such a backward time and such a strange land" and, although we can glimpse something of God's power now and again in the miracles in the gospels, in the end, God's true nature was shown in utter rejection and loneliness, although this was only one side of the coin which was revealed two days later. God did not come in order to impress, frighten or order us into loving him, he came 'emptied' of all his glory (the theological word is 'kenotic') in order that we might truly respond to him. God wants our love but he will not force it because true love can never be forced.

At either end of November we see two different aspects of that love. At All Saints Tide we see examples of people who loved God in particular times, places or circumstances which, though it certainly doesn't make them perfect, shows a remarkable response to God's love which we might learn from. At the other end of the month we have the feast of Christ the King, just before Advent. This is when we think of the true glory of Christ (Pantokrator - universal ruler is the term) which exists even when, like the peasant girl, we are not allowed to see it.

St Augustine wrote of a much misunderstood term called 'original sin' which has been taken to paint a bleak picture of Christians as people who believe that fundamentally we are all as humans bad. This is not what Augustine meant at all. Rather, like the peasant girl, however much we might like dancing and singing, the fact is that we have to work in the fields. However much we might try, we are never going to approach the glory of God by our own efforts. Rather, along with all the things which make us human, if we grow in our relationship with God, we might learn to be drawn to him, to let go of all the things which are less than glorious and to recognise, like a prince

found in peasants clothing, where things that are better than we ever yet imagined were possible are to be found. That life can be better than we ever thought. Being a saint (or a Christian which is what saint means) is not about being perfect, its just about realising that we don't have to remain a peasant

Your Friend and Vicar, David

Vicar's Letter
October 2012

Dear Friends,

In the 1983 Film adaptation of the Willy Russell Play 'Educating Rita', Rita, played by Julie Walters (In her first film) is a working class girl wanting to study literature because, in her view, the middle class people who read it all have happy lives. What she discovers is that they don't. Her tutor, played by Michael Caine, is an alcoholic whose family life is collapsing, describing himself as "appalling but good enough for my appalling students", and her room mate at university attempts suicide.

Rita then discovers that if she is to carry on her 'education', then it must be as much personal as it is academic. She is forced to abandon her working class family's lifestyle, which means her husband chooses to leave her (not her choosing to leave her husband, it is worth noting). Furthermore, when her tutor (Caine) recovers from his malaise and sets off to a new life in Australia, inviting her to go with him, Rita realises that to be truly 'educated', she must give herself the freedom to make that choice, ie, to let go of even the security which she has found in her 'educated' life, that is to say, her tutor, Michael Caine.

Reading recently the writings of the great Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart (as you do, I can hear you say!), I was instantly reminded of this film. Why, you might legitimately ask? Well, on one level it is because Eckhart's theme finds echoes in the theme of letting go, which Julie Walters plays out so painfully and with such humour and grace in 'Educating Rita'. Eckhart noticed that it is a characteristic of creatures to make something out of nothing. A bird, for instance makes a nest out of all sorts. So also does God make something out of nothing, both in creation and, if we will but let him, with us, if we would just let go of those things we cling to which give us, we think, security; for example, possessions, doctrines, ambitions, attitudes, even, dare we say it, buildings. They may provide a security but it is the security of a security blanket. It is a peace of sorts but it is the peace of the desert. Eckhart rather describes how true peace means becoming nothing and letting God create us into something.

You might wonder what is the other level that I was reminded of in 'Educating Rita' when reading of these themes of letting go of security. Well, I'll tell you. I first saw the film on board an aeroplane. It was the plane taking me, aged 18, in the February of 1984 to Calcutta, India. I was travelling alone and, although I was to be met, I didn't know it then, by some of the kindest and caring people whom I have ever had the privilege of knowing, and who recognised immediately my vulnerability, I was at that moment, how shall I put it, terrified! Set in places I knew well, Liverpool, and reflecting some of my own family background, the film I saw on that aeroplane perfectly reflected my own terrified predicament, yet I knew that this was a journey I had to take - and one which I now see leading, many years later, to my ordination, by some divine irony, in Liverpool Cathedral!

Your Friend and Vicar, David

Vicar's Letter
September 2012

Dear Friends,

First there was the cost, could we as a nation in a time of austerity afford it? Then there were the border issues, what would the staff do in the end? Then there were the security issues, they only had seven years to prepare! There was comment from a gaff prone American visitor and finally the empty seats where the already privileged should have been sat. Yes, if you've not guessed already, I'm talking about the 2012 Olympic games, or, more specifically, how anxieties over their preparation was perceived.

And then the games began, with a huge spectacular to match any seen anywhere in the world. The medals started pouring in (with some North West athletes taking the lead!) and everything went swimmingly (well not perhaps in the swimming!). We have had our best games ever (yes, I know that 1908 provided more medals but the 2012 games were infinitely more competitive - 10,490 athletes from 204 countries in 2012 compared to 2,008 athletes, of whom nearly 700 were British(!) from only 22 countries in 1908, when China didn't even send a team!!). The games and almost everything in them went off without any major incident, and in Mo Farah and Usain Bolt, not to mention their celebrations, there came the 'magic' moments so hoped for by Lord Coe.

Well, we have to ask, was there any need for any of that worrying, not to say curmudgeonly prophesying of disaster which preceded the games. In my view there probably was, and the questions about the cost still have relevance, but only in that they helped to focus attention and ensure the careful planning which ultimately led to a lovely Olympic Games. Where there is any major action or change there will always be, probably rightly, those who tread carefully and ask searching questions. There will also be a need for a far reaching vision which the questions can help to succeed.

We all know what challenges and changes face us at Immanuel in the coming Pastoral Reorganisation, and those which face our Brothers and Sisters in all the other local Churches. Over the coming months there will be many difficult questions to be asked and many challenging choices to be faced. The important principle to be followed must be to face these issues head on and not to duck them. In this way we can, I believe, ensure the success of the vision we must share for the long term well being of our Church and all who this Parish Serves. That's not being negative or curmudgeonly but being realistic and practical, because the vision needs to be forged by the reality if it is to succeed, as I believe that it can.

Let us 'Run the Straight Race' that is set before us, as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, and we will thereby commit our best efforts to the Lord. We might not set a new world record, but, like I think the 2012 Olympic Games probably were, it will be worth it

Your Friend and Vicar, David

Vicar's Letter
August 2012

Dear Friends,

There's an old joke which I hope you'll forgive me if I tell again. It concerns a certain man who, faced with rising floodwater takes to the roof of his house. As a God fearing man he faithfully waits to be rescued by God. Along comes a lifeboat, which he refuses to get in as he knows that God will come. As the waters rise further, along comes the Marines, whom he likewise turns away. As the rising waters drive him to his chimney he lastly sees an RAF helicopter lowering a winch to airlift him to safety, but this too is refused, so sure is he of God's faithfulness to him. The water rises further and he drowns. Standing before God in heaven he asks God why he was left to drown. God answers, as I'm sure you know, "But I sent you a lifeboat, the Royal Marines and an RAF helicopter, what else did you want?"

It might feel, on reading my report on pages 6-7 of this magazine, of discussions about proposed pastoral reorganisation that, especially when viewed in the wider Diocesan context, the flood waters are now all around us and rising. Despite the very real flood waters which have been seen in this and other areas lately, and which you can see on page 17 of this magazine and on the website, the flood waters of secularism, rising costs and the declining numbers of clergy may seem very threatening.

I recently saw in a book of photographs from old Blackburn and Darwen some people being rescued from houses in Darwen which were completely flooded out in, I think, 1964, A policeman carrying a small child while an anxious

father looks on with an expression I don't think would be any different no matter how far back in time you went. With the recent floods in this area I wonder if any lessons were learned.

If we don't learn any lessons and remain holed up waiting to be rescued by some almighty divine intervention from the challenges faced by reorganisation then we might find ourselves one day being asked by God why we refused the help he sent, indeed is sending to us at the present time. Perhaps our prayer should be to have the eyes to see where our faithful God is acting, I'm sure that Darwen father in 1964 didn't need telling.

The Ancient Israelites were terrified of the sea, they were not a sea going people, which might be why the storm which Jesus calmed was doubly frightening, they hated the water. But surely the challenge of a storm or a flood is to build better boats, to work with what you have no power over or can't control. I'm sure that in the months ahead that is exactly what we at Immanuel will do; to build lasting structures, boats and watercourses and to recognise and work with what God sends us.

Your Friend and Vicar, David