



Parish of St. Mary's Swynnerton & St. James' Cotes Heath
 Sunday January 31st (Epiphany 4)
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Worship this week continues online. Do join us again this Sunday at 10.00. Use the link below and log in from 9.50.
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82172796502?pwd=dm9PamdVL1I6YTgzOFFTQzQ1L0NqQT09>



This week as deaths have climbed ever higher, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York have issued a call to the nation to pause, reflect and pray. Here is an extract from their open letter which you can find on the Church of England website.

“As we reach the terrible milestone of 100,000 deaths from COVID-19, we invite everyone in our nation to pause as we reflect on the enormity of this pandemic. 100,000 isn’t just an abstract figure. Each number is a person: someone we loved and someone who loved us. We also believe that each of these people was known to God and cherished by God.

We write to you then in consolation, but also in encouragement, and ultimately in the hope of Jesus Christ. The God who comes to us in Jesus knew grief and suffering himself. On the cross, Jesus shares the weight of our sadness. We therefore encourage everyone who is feeling scared, or lost or isolated to cast their fears on God.”

“As winter gives way to Spring ...”

This weekend sees the end of the Christmas season and the approach of Candlemas, when the church remembers the presentation of Christ in the Temple.

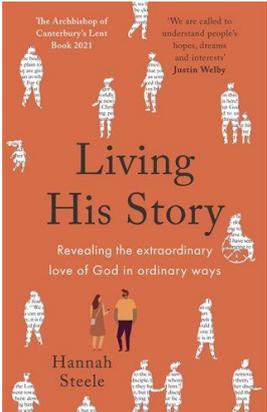
In times gone by, when houses weren’t decorated until late in December, the Christmas tree would stay in place till February 1st then be burnt. Candles were lit from the fire and taken back to the church, carrying the light of Christmas into the rest of the year. Some see it as a significant date, falling halfway between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox, encouraging us to think that Spring is on the way.



The book chosen by the Archbishop of Canterbury for Lent reading this year is “Living His Story”, by Hannah Steele (SPCK, £7.99) To accompany this text, from Ash Wednesday (17 February) to Easter Sunday (4 April), there will be six reflections for each week, written by Stephen Hance, the Church of England’s National Lead for Evangelism and Witness. Each will include a short passage from the

Bible, a brief exploration of the reading, and a prayer. The daily reflections will be made available through a booklet available to buy from Church House Publishing, (£1.99) (online or phone 01603 785925) as well as a free app, emails, audio and through the Church of England’s social media accounts.

Both the book and the accompanying daily reflections encourage all Christians to think about their calling, how to share their faith and reflect on the difference Christ makes in our lives.



“One thing we can all do is pray. We hope it is some consolation to know that the church prays for the life of our nation every day. Whether you’re someone of faith, or not, we invite you to call on God in prayer. Starting on 1 February we invite you to set aside time every evening to pray, particularly at 6pm each day. More than ever, this is a time when we need to love each other. Prayer is an expression of love.” (Archbishops of Canterbury and York)

Gracious God,
as we remember before you the thousands who have died,
surround us and all who mourn with your strong compassion.
Be gentle with us in our grief,
protect us from despair,
and give us grace to persevere
and face the future with hope
in Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

We continue to hold in our prayers all those listed here. This week we’ve been asked to pray especially for a young woman named Maddie who has contracted the virus, along with her mother. We also remember Ray and Julie Lewney, Richard Wenger, Fr. Paul Chavasse, Wendy Jackson and Paul Bell, Dot Sergeant, Elaine Dulson, Pat Lawrence, Carol & Martyn Turner, Pat Barley, Geoff & Linda Foster, Margaret Farr, Kay Bickerton, George Edwards, Nick & Jonquil Goacher, the Murrie family, Alex Baines and Margaret McKnight. We pray for the friends & family of Pat Morris-Jones who has died this week, staff in hospitals caring for patients and especially for our clergy and lay ministers working with bereaved families.

- Our former archdeacon Matthew Parker was due to be consecrated as Bishop of Stafford on 28 January but this has been postponed due to the pandemic. Instead, he will be licensed as Episcopal Vicar for the Stafford Area which will make it possible for him to undertake the usual pastoral and administrative duties of a bishop until such time as he can be consecrated. You can read the sermon he’s written for this Sunday on pages 3 and 4.
- Helen Ladell sends heartfelt thanks to the many people who remembered her and sent cards for Christmas and her birthday. She says that they all helped to ease the solitude and were greatly appreciated. Looking forward to meeting up again, Helen sends Happy New Year wishes.
- Margaret Bailey’s funeral will be held at St. Mary’s at 12.45 on February 9th. Nicky Beasley and Noreen Russell will be officiating. Owing to the current restrictions, unfortunately attendance is by invitation only. The possibility of a video link enabling friends to share in the service is being explored and more details will follow in time for next week’s news sheet. Any queries, please speak to Nicky.



- If you need an injection of hope at this challenging time, do try the free phone line set up for Lockdown. There’s a message from the Archbishop, a different hymn and a helpful short talk for each day as well as hymns to listen to on a loop. There’s new content for the new year and daily acts of worship. A welcome boost for anyone living alone.

MORNING WORSHIP FOR EPIPHANY 4

**Arise, shine: for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.**

Confession: God be gracious to us and bless us,
And make your face shine upon us:

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

May your ways be known on the earth,
Your saving power among the nations:
Christ have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

You, Lord, have made known your salvation,
And reveal your justice in the sight of the nations.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

**May the God of love bring us back to himself, forgive
us our sins, and assure us of his eternal love
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Creed: Let us declare our faith
in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.
**Christ died for our sins in accordance with the
Scriptures; he was buried;
he was raised to life on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures;
afterwards he appeared to his followers,
and to all the apostles: this we have received,
and this we believe. Amen.**

Collect: Lord Jesus Christ,
Light of the nations and glory of Israel:
Make your home among us, and present us pure and
holy to your heavenly Father,
your God, and our God. **Amen.**

Our Father
In this coming week may those whose faith is failing
be given strength to look to you for answers to their
prayers. May doubt be turned to peace and joy that
you are willing and able to hear their voices. Remind
them of the words of our Saviour Jesus Christ that he
will never leave them or forsake them, you will be
with them always.

Lord we lift up to you all our families who are
struggling to cope with home schooling children. We
pray they will be provided with the necessary
equipment needed to do on-line lessons. Thank you
for the campaigns to get computers into schools for
the needy and underprivileged. Help parents to
understand the lesson plans in order to teach their
children.

Thank you, our gracious and merciful God, for
enabling those to embrace Zoom in order to worship
you on a Sunday. We praise you for gathering
together our other benefices in this way so we can
join as one body in Christ. Bless those who struggle
with technology and are not able to join in with us.
May they still receive nourishment from your word in
the bible and in Christian content and hymns and
songs on television.

Our hearts go out to the many in our land and
overseas who have lost loved ones during this last
year. Father hear our prayer for those who are ill
through the worsening Covid virus and the many who
have missed out on cancer treatment vital to their
healing.

Lord we bring to you those named on our newsletter
who need healing physically, mentally and
spiritually.....

Lord in your mercy hear our prayers. Amen.

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy
name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth
as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those
who trespass against us. And lead us not into
temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the
kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen.**

“Now unto him who is able to keep you from falling
and to present you faultless before the presence of
his glory with exceeding joy. To the only wise God our
Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power
both now and ever. Amen” (KJV Jude 24-25)

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love
of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with
us all, now and evermore, Amen.**

Thanks to
Denise Snowball for
our prayers
this week.



THE GIFT OF HOPE (Luke 2:22- 40)

The novelist Vikram Seth on Desert Island Discs chose as one of his top discs a poignant recording made during the war by a BBC sound engineer. The engineer was capturing the song of nightingales in a Surrey garden but, whilst recording, a hundred and ninety-seven Lancaster bombers passed overhead en route to a bombing raid in Germany. In the recording you can hear the joyful song of the nightingale and then, underneath and growing in intensity and threatening to overwhelm the birdsong, the ominous drone of the bombers. Seth spoke of the "heart-breaking counterpoint of joy and pain".

(www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/magazine-35874257)

In the gospel story of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple we have just such a heart-breaking counterpoint of joy and sorrow. Here we see so much that is good and beautiful.

There is a new life represented in this child only days old. Here is extraordinary hope and anticipation.

We have the pride of grateful parents, their joy in this child who has been brought to birth, unique, theirs, and yet a gift from God.

Here is great faith and devotion too. Simeon and Anna are watching and waiting for God to bring consolation and redemption to Israel. How easy it would be for them to become disillusioned or distracted in their waiting. But they stick with it because they believe that God is good and loves Israel and will act for them.

And there is a blessing given to the baby Jesus by the elderly Simeon; the insight that this little child will bring light not only to waiting Israel but to all the nations of the earth. The Spirit of God is at work in Anna and Simeon and hovers over this child and his parents. In God's temple, God's Spirit bears witness to God's son.

Life is glorious and to be celebrated. Nightingales sing! There is love, joy, faithfulness, gratitude, new discoveries and the knowledge that we are in the presence of a loving God.

But this story of Jesus presented in the temple is a bittersweet story; there is a darker note to be heard, a counterpoint. Because when we look at all these characters, we sense their vulnerability, their frailty. What, after all, is more helpless and fragile than a baby?

And what of his parents? What is poor old Joseph to make of this strange birth? And Mary? Does the taint of disgrace still hang around her and her new-born child? The circumstances of Jesus' birth were, after all, let's say, unusual. It's all a bit messy and unsatisfactory, not quite the perfect family as seen on TV advertising, more like our families, more like our experience of what life is actually like.

And Simeon and Anna carry their own vulnerabilities too. Anna's husband died seven years into their marriage. For the greater part of her life, she has been widowed and, as a widow in those times, lives a precarious existence dependent on the charity of her male relatives.

And Simeon, waiting and waiting and waiting, must have had his moments of doubt and disappointment. Sometimes he must've hoped against hope and trusted through gritted teeth that God would console Israel.

Because Simeon and Anna carry not only their own struggles, doubts and the infirmities of old age but also the sadness of their people. Simeon, we are told, is waiting for the consolation of Israel. If Israel needs consoling then Israel is living in a time of mourning and sadness. It was hard for pious and faithful people to see their nation, God's chosen people, under the oppression of the Gentile nations.

Anna, we are told, is looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. If Jerusalem needs redeeming it is because Jerusalem is not free. Anna and Simeon are full of hope and expectation for Israel but they also mourn its captivity.

So into such a world - in all its glory and all its fragility - comes Jesus, the Lord's Christ, the glory of his people Israel and the light that will lighten the Gentiles. And how does he come? Does he come as the divine fixer who will bypass all that complicated and messy human emotion and experience? What is revealed is that, rather than sidestepping the muddle of human life, in Jesus, God chooses to dive straight down into it. So here is a great mystery: the God who made the world now enters into that world and submits to all its glory and fragility.

Simeon blesses Jesus but...

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

This is not what a mother wants to hear about her baby. She doesn't want to hear that he will be spoken against. She doesn't want talk of swords that pierce the heart. But in order to redeem our suffering, God enters into our suffering. There is great light in this Candlemas story but there is shadow too and by far the greatest shadow is cast by the shape of a cross. We can hear, so to speak, the nightingale song and the drone of Lancaster bombers. And this light and the shade cannot –in this world, at least - be separated out, as much as we might wish it to be so.

I don't need to labour the point. In the past year we have seen something of the glory of human life in the selfless work of frontline workers of all kinds, the brilliance of scientists in creating a vaccine and in countless moments of human kindness and neighbourliness. But we have also heard the threatening rumble of suffering and death. We have seen - in hospital wards, lost jobs, lost school days, mental health problems and widening divisions between rich and poor - the heart-breaking fragility of human life. We have all been touched by this crisis but for some of us this will have come painfully close to our homes and families.

In a world of sorrow and oppression, there is much we can do as Christians – there are actions we can take. Run foodbanks, setup telephone helplines, lead online worship, get the shopping for a shielding neighbour and so on. All really good things to do but, like Simeon and Anna, we must also carry in our hearts the fragility of the world, waiting and praying for its consolation and redemption. This is the world into which Jesus was born and, in fellowship with him and with all who suffer and mourn, we pray, longing and waiting for the greater dawning of his Kingdom in a world of shadow and suffering.

And as we faithfully bear witness in this way to the sorrow of the world, we also bear faithful witness to the one who has come amongst us, whose presence is a "light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel". In this fragile little child, Anna and Simeon see salvation – one greater even than a much-needed vaccination! They see not only the piercing sword, the falling and rising, the rumble of the engines of war overhead, the stealthy spread of a deadly disease, they see salvation. God's choice is not only to share with us in the mess but also to redeem it.

As we hold together the counterpoint of joy and pain, may God give us the faith to live as those who look for consolation and redemption in these dark times. May God give us grace to stand and wait in fellowship with Jesus and all those who endure the pain of the world. And then may God give us the gift of hope in the One who is coming into the world, the light who will lighten the nations.

Rt Revd Matthew Parker

