

# Mike's message .....

You are invited to the  
**2016 Lent Course!**

This year our Lent Course  
will be on the theme of

## 'Migration and Movement'.

As always our Lent Course will be run as a course for St Andrew's and with an invitation for the wider Black Country Circuit. There'll be a choice of evening or daytime sessions and, of course, you can 'mix and match' to fit in with your other commitments.

'Migration and Movement' is a five session course focussing on the topical issue of migration and the movement of people. The course looks at economic migration, refugees and the displacement of communities due to climate change, as well as human trafficking. You can come with your thoughts, fears and opinions and listen to those of others and their experiences too.

We'll hear of the experiences of churches elsewhere in the world where the movement of people has for many years been providing challenges and opportunities. We do not claim to have the answers, but we hope this course will inspire and challenge us to engage more deeply with the issues and to consider how we might respond.

The course has been prepared by the Anglican mission agency US (previously known as USPG). Booklets will be provided but all details are also on their website. Links are on my resource site at [www.mjclaridge.co.uk](http://www.mjclaridge.co.uk)

Come along, enjoy, be challenged and challenge others!

### Dates:

Monday evenings at 7.30 pm  
22nd, 29th February, 7th, 14th, 21st March

Tuesday mornings at 11.00 am  
23rd February, 1st, 8th, 15th, 22nd March  
*The Tuesday sessions will be followed by refreshments*



# Mike's message .....

*Vain the stone, the watch, the seal!*

*Easter Day Family Worship and Baptism  
Sunday 27th March, 9.30am*

Easter is the major celebration of the Christian year. It encompasses and celebrates the heart of our Gospel - as the love of God, revealed in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, is shown to be greater than all that seeks to imprison us, even death itself.

There's a new film in the cinemas this year based on the Easter events. 'Risen' is written from the point of view of the Romans in the days following the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. It puts a Roman soldier, Clavius, in the lead role as he investigates what would become the most famous disappearance of a body. The empty tomb is treated in the film as a crime scene, and the disciples are caught up in a manhunt, as Clavius investigates what has happened to the body of Jesus.

The plot of 'Risen' is based on Matthew's Gospel. The Roman authorities remember that Jesus said "*after three days I will rise again*" (Matthew 27 .63). Thinking that the disciples might try to steal Jesus' body, the Romans place a guard at the tomb, seal the stone and keep watch. When the tomb is later found to be empty the authorities seek to explain it by telling the soldiers to say "*his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep*" (Matthew 28 .13). This explanation soon unravels and triggers the investigation as the portrayal of the last chapter of Matthew's Gospel takes on the feeling of a 'CSI: Judaea Desert 33AD'. 'Risen' opens in cinemas on 18th March. Just in time for Holy Week and Easter viewing.

What is the message of the Resurrection for us today? The Resurrection isn't an event that belongs in the past but is a present and living reality. That's why we say "Christ is Risen" not "Christ has Risen". It's a living reality in our lives and we are called to proclaim it in the lives of others too.

The love of God, stronger even than death itself, can transform lives that are imprisoned by guilt from the past or something weighing us down in the present. It can free us from prejudices that trap us behind walls of suspicion and fear or impede our ability to love others. All this can be removed when we realise that God loves us with a love that makes "vain the stone, the watch, the seal" (Charles Wesley) for:

*Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate,  
light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death;  
victory is ours through Him who loves us. (Desmond Tutu)*



# Mike's message .....

## Easter, more than a Sunday.

In all likelihood, by the time that you read this, Easter Day will have come and gone. But Easter will be still with us. Why? Because Easter is about far more than one day, or even one week. Easter is a season in itself, as long as the season of Lent that precedes it. Easter is six weeks long. That's a lot of Easter eggs!

The Easter season is marked in our worship by accounts of how the risen Jesus was encountered by his followers. There's the tearful Mary, the first to encounter the risen Jesus, who mistakes him as the gardener before she recognises him and her grief turns to joy (*John 20 . 11 - 18*). The other frightened disciples are locked in an upstairs room when suddenly Jesus stands before them. Fear turns to delight. One, called Thomas, is missing, but a week later he too encounters the risen Christ (*John 20 .19 - 29*) and his faith is renewed. Then there are the couple, on their way home distraught after the events of the crucifixion, and puzzled by talk of an empty tomb. They meet a person on the road, who seems a stranger but, when they invite him to stay and he breaks the bread at a meal, they recognise him as Jesus. No longer distraught they make their way quickly and joyfully to tell others (*Luke 24 .13 - 35*). We hear of some of the disciples returning to their occupation as fishermen, but without success. With no fish in their nets they reluctantly take the advice of a man on the shoreline who tells them to cast on the other side of the boat. They do so, and their nets are filled. Then they recognise the man as Jesus. Their frustrations are turned to satisfaction and Jesus even satisfies their hunger at a lakeside barbecue! (*John 21 .1 - 14*).

These and other accounts of the risen Jesus (*see Acts 9 .1 - 31*) have one thing in common. Encounters with the risen Christ transform people. Easter is about transformation. Transformation in the way we live our lives, our attitude to others, our attitude to ourself. It's about new life, freed from all that has imprisoned us or weighed us down in the past. In the Resurrection even the power of death itself is transformed to new life. Like the stone outside Jesus' tomb, all that weighs us down or entombs us can be removed. How? Simply by realising that God in Jesus Christ loves us; unreservedly, unconditionally, unlimited.

Easter is more than a Sunday. It's even more than a season. It's for ever, in our lives and the lives of others. Mark's Gospel, in it's earliest form, doesn't describe any encounters with the risen Jesus. It ends with three women finding the empty tomb and fleeing in fear (*Mark 21 1 - 8*). Why does Mark finish his Gospel like this?

Could it be because he wants the next part of the account to be ours? Our encounter with the risen Christ. Yours and mine. That's why Easter's more than a Sunday, more than a season. It's forever. The transforming risen Christ lives in the lives of his people; in the past, present and into the future. That's why, instead of Christ has Risen, we proclaim:

**Christ is Risen. Alleluia!**



# Mike's message .....

## Reconciliation

I'm writing this during a period of free time while away at a conference. Every two years the Diocese of Lichfield invite clergy to The Hayes Conference Centre in Swanwick, Derbyshire. The conference is a great time, not only to explore issues that we encounter in our ministry, but also to catch up with friends old and new. I'm feeling old as this is now my twelfth conference! Having spent all 24 years (so far) of ordained ministry in Lichfield Diocese I know a lot of people here and, in such a large Diocese (all of Staffordshire, the northern half of Shropshire and a great chunk of the Black Country) it's only on occasions such as this that we meet up.



This year's theme is 'Reconciliation'. Each day starts with Bible Study entertainingly led by a Roman Catholic Jesuit, Nicolas King. He examines how the rifts that separate us from God and each other can be healed. On the first day we then went on to look at 'Forgiveness' as a sub-theme - how it can be the most difficult and painful process, but at the heart of a wider reconciliation. This was led by Revd Dr Stephen Cherry (Dean, King's College, Cambridge). It's too easy to simply avoid those we've wronged, or have wronged us, but the Christian faith demands that we reach out and seek to live alongside - and in communion with - those we need to forgive or be forgiven by.

The next sub-theme was 'Reconciliation and Ecology'. The speaker, Prof Richard Bauckham (St Andrew's University) took the image of humanity as 'stewards of creation' (as portrayed in Genesis 1 and 2) and, looking at Colossians 1.15 - 20, we explored what reconciliation with all creation might involve. What do the challenges of the affect humanity has on the environment mean for us as Christians?

The final keynote speaker will be Revd Dr Andrea Russell, from The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham (where I trained). She'll be leading us in a very promising session on 'The role of humour and laughter in Reconciliation'. Add to this some optional workshops, a superb comedian on Tuesday evening, a Ceilidh on Wednesday, excellent food and, of course, a well stocked bar - a great time is being had by all.

Reconciliation is at the heart of the Christian faith. In Jesus Christ, God has reached out to us in an act of immense, all giving love. In Jesus Christ we are reconciled to God, no matter what we have done or who we are.

In a world of so many divisions, our role as Christians is to be reconciled with others and help others to be reconciled with each other, as we are with Christ in God.

# Mike's message . . . .

## Referendum!

We're about to be able to vote in a referendum. That's a rarity in the United Kingdom as, apart from the Scottish Independence Referendum (for Scottish voters only), there hasn't been a referendum in this country for over forty years.

This, we keep being told, is a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity. As the ballot papers on 23rd June will ask us the question is "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?".

Now let's get this straight. There's no 'right' way that Christians should vote. It's a matter for individual decision based on consideration of facts available. Some of the main churches in the country (*Methodist, Baptist, United Reformed and Church of Scotland*) have produced a guide called "Think, Pray, Vote: EU Referendum Guide for Churches". I've made it available at [www.mjclaridge.co.uk](http://www.mjclaridge.co.uk) and will ensure printed copies are available at the back of church. It covers issues as follows: Single market, Sovereignty and subsidiarity, Free movement of people, Work and benefits, Peace and international relations, Care for the environment, and Agriculture and food.

Some people will think that I should have avoided entering into this area at all. The phrase "Religion and politics should never be mixed" often gets touted about. I believe that statement is blasphemous! Why? The meaning if the word 'politics' is from the Greek language and means 'related to citizens'. Being related to, and involved with, the life of people is what the Incarnation (God living among us as Jesus Christ) is all about. The subject that Jesus speaks most about in the Gospels is money and its use. Saying the Gospel isn't about politics denies that 'God is with us', involved in our lives, in all our messy details, in the person of Jesus Christ.

I have said that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way for Christians to vote and I stand by that. However there are traps that Christians should avoid falling into. One is the 'demonisation', for want of a better terminology, of people who have arrived in this country as migrants. We need to remember that all people are created in God's image and, as God's people, we have a duty to welcome the alien and stranger in our midst. The whole Old Testament narrative is about God's people on journeys of migration. Of course this need not be a defining factor in itself and I know several Christians who are voting "Leave" but are advocating that this country's borders should remain open.

For what its worth I can tell you that I intend to vote 'Remain'. But I urge you to consider all the issues, and then think, pray and then vote, whether that be 'Remain' or 'Leave', according to your conscience on 23rd June.



# Mike's message . . . .

## Sure and Steadfast

There's a very special Family Service in July!

On Sunday 3rd July at our 9.30am service we'll be holding our Annual Awards Presentation for our Boys Brigade and Girls Association (BBGA).

The BBGA Company at St Andrew's, who are the 4th West Bromwich, is now over 30 years old.

You'll remember we had a wonderful 30th

Anniversary Service a couple of years ago. 'The 4th' started life down the road at Swan Village Methodist Church when the Minister at the time said to Margaret Morgan "we need to start something for the youth" or words to that effect. So it was that the 4th West Bromwich came into being. The Company moved to St Andrew's with the Swan Village Congregation a few years later. Many young people have passed through it's ranks. I've had conversations with 'bridegrooms to be' who've mentioned they used to enjoy coming to St Andrew's 'for BB'.

Over all these years Margaret Morgan has been Company Captain and, together with her hard working team of leaders, continues to lead an excellent organisation for young people at St Andrew's. The activities enjoyed by our BBGA include an annual Weekend Away, competitions - from athletics to Bible knowledge - and day trips for rock climbing, archery or other fun activities. The weekly BBGA evening (Tuesday at St Andrew's) also has a variety of activities each week from indoor football, crafts, knowledge building exercises and even rocket making and test firing on The Jesson!

The Boys Brigade and Girls Association is a specifically Christian organisation with, "discipline, reverence, discipline and self-respect" being among it's objectives. It's motto "Sure and Steadfast" is taken from Hebrews, Chapter 6, verse 19 where faith is described as being "a sure and certain anchor for the soul". That's represented in both the BBGA badge and it's hymn "Will your anchor hold in the storms of life". We'll be singing the latter on Sunday 3rd July of course.

There'll be plenty of awards to give out this year. Recently our BBGA has won the Mid-Staffs and Sandwell Battalion's Orienteering competition and been runners up in the athletics tournament. So come along and celebrate on 3rd July.

It you know any young people who might be interested in the BBGA and it's activities they would be very welcome to come along on Tuesdays. New members are always welcome. Our times are:

Anchors (5 - 7 yr olds): Tuesdays 6pm - 7.15pm

Juniors and Company (8 - 16 yr olds): Tuesdays 7pm - 8.30pm.



# Mike's message . . . .

## Love is stronger than hate

I am sitting down to write this in the context of the dreadful news from Normandy of the death of a French priest, Father Jacques Hamel, martyred while he said Mass in a church in St Étienne-du-Rouvray.

It is the latest in series of dreadful events that leave us with both many questions and also fearful. The Normandy attack was the latest in the last few weeks that have also seen appalling loss of life in among other places Nice, Munich, Tokyo, Baghdad and Kabul. It's regrettable, but probable, that by the time that you read this other attacks may have been added to that list.

Behind most of the attacks we've seen over the past few years are warped ideologies. Good religious, philosophical or political ideologies that have been twisted or perverted into macabre versions of what they should be. The Munich attack, for example, was carried out by a young man who idolised Anders Breivik - the Norwegian man who massacred 77 people, many of them teenagers exactly five years before. Breivik had based his views on a twisted version of his Christian background. Other attacks have been linked to IS, a twisted version of it's adherents backgrounds in the Islamic faith. Christians and Jews share so much good in common with true Islam as Children of Abraham/Ibrahim and, as the Quran calls all three, 'People of the Book'.

It will soon be the fifteenth anniversary of the events of 9/11 when terrorists hijacked four planes to crashed them into buildings including New York's World Trade Centre. Near to the two towers that day was Rowan Williams, later Archbishop of Canterbury. He was trapped for some hours in a building where he had been giving a lecture, just one block away from the towers. In the aftermath of the events he wrote the short book 'Writing in the Dust'. In that essay he warned that if violence was responded to with violence it would result in a whirlwind of destruction. The West responded to 9/11 with invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and, especially through the shortcomings and lack of planning of the latter, the ground was inadvertently prepared in which IS would grow.

It's easy to be wise after the event of course. Situations and circumstances change and the powers that be always have more knowledge of what is going on behind the scenes. The intelligence agencies have beyond doubt saved many lives through their work. But where else can we find reassurance and encouragement that somehow the cycle of violence and hatred has to be broken.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus exhorts his disciples to "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" (5 .44). That is a difficult task indeed and, for many, one that seems impossible. It's so easy to be consumed with hatred and anger when we see atrocities, and the urge to strike back seems irresistible. But Jesus' teachings hold firm, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*". That is a difficult task but we should be urged on and encouraged by that great prayer attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

**Goodness is stronger than evil, Love is stronger than hate, Light is stronger than darkness,  
Life is stronger than death, Victory is ours through Him who loves us. Amen.**



# Mike's message .....

Come, ye thankful people, come!

September is upon us and with it comes Harvest Festival. At St Andrew's we're having ours on Sunday 25th September (9.30am). I have one at Ryders Green Methodist Church later that day at 4.00pm (Revd Phil Thomas is there at 11.00am). I start earlier in the month though with one at Wesley on Sunday 11th September, with a Family Service at 11.00am.



There's no set date for Harvest Festival. That's logical, as Harvest time as an agricultural event varies depending on where you are in the country. Originally Harvest Festival would have been spontaneous, as soon as the final crops were gathered in, and that would depend on the weather.

I say 'originally' but Harvest Festival is a surprisingly modern invention. It was only in the mid-19th Century that the celebration started being held in church buildings. Prior to that each farm or family would have had a Harvest Home celebration. Some in rural communities still do. But doesn't mean that there wasn't a thanksgiving in the church's life for the fruits of creation. There was a much older festival known as Lammas Day, at the beginning of August, when a loaf made from the first wheat of the harvest was used as the Communion bread. The origins of Lammas Day seem to stretch back to the reign of King Alfred the Great (849 - 899), who, although he founded many churches and monastic foundations, is chiefly remembered for overcooking some of the harvest produce!

Elsewhere in the world Harvest Festivals are celebrated according to local traditions. In Judaism Pentecost (which later gave it's name to a Christian festival too) is a Harvest Festival. In Jesus' day the first fruits of corn were presented in the Temple (Deuteronomy 16.9). It was held fifty days after Passover, hence it's name. Other faiths have their Harvest Festivals too. Within Christianity there is a wide spread of tradition. Perhaps it is the USA that harvest has it's biggest celebration. There 'Thanksgiving Day', on the fourth Thursday in November, has it's origins in the harvest celebrations, and of God's wider provision.

At Harvest Festival we are reminded of how we are dependant on the good things that the earth produces and of our duty to share them responsibly with those in need. Come along and give thanks for the Harvest as we proclaim:

*All good gifts around us, are sent from heaven above;  
then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.*

*(from a hymn translated by Jane Campbell from the original German of Matthias Claudius)*



# Mike's message .....

## Autumn Hope!

Autumn is a season of change. A season of the dying of the light. A season of decay and endings. A season of recollection and remembrance.

As the nights draw in and sunlight is less in evidence, Autumn can seem to be a gloomy time, maybe even a time that is overbearing in sense of endings and encroaching darkness.

But Autumn is also an intensely beautiful time. Leaves take on the myriad hues of red, orange and yellow. When the sun does shine there's no other season that can match the beauty of autumn for its colours and the feeling and sound of dried leaves crunching underfoot on the ground.

The seasons are closely associated with the church calendar. Christmas wouldn't be the same without snowy scenes on Christmas cards. Although the truth is we've had more 'white Easters' in the last hundred years than we've had 'white Christmases'. As the countries of western Europe spread their influence around the world they took imagery of the seasons with them. There are winter scenes on Christmas cards even in tropical countries. The same is true of Australia and New Zealand.

But in the Southern Hemisphere the seasons are reversed. Christmas is in summer and beach barbecues replace turkey and trimmings. Autumn there is the season for Easter. That may seem strange to us for whom autumn is about endings rather than new life. Death and decay rather than the lambs and bunnies of our Easter cards.

As Christians we can discern God's promise of new life and new beginnings even as the autumn hues deepen around us. As a contemporary worship poem puts it:

*Fallen leaves go back to earth, Re-absorbed to bring new birth.*

*("Autumn" - Marjorie Dobson)*

Scripture is also reflective on the themes of autumn. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul likens the Resurrection to the cycle of life and death:

*"What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. As for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or some other grain. But gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body".*

*(1 Corinthians 15 .36 - 38)*

Even in autumn, as we see endings all around us, let us give thanks to God for the new life we have received through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



# Mike's message .....

## Flowers of Remembrance

November brings with it the time of Remembrance. It's especially poignant this year as it is a significant anniversary. Mid-way through four years of commemoration of the Centenary of the First World War, there has been a particular focus this year on the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

As part of the commemorations, and specifically for this season of Remembrance, the Royal British Legion have produced a special pin badge. Above the words 'Somme 100' are two flowers; a red Poppy and a blue Cornflower.

The story of the Poppy is well known in this country. On fields once the scene of slaughter, blown apart by shells, it was poppies that were the first flowers to grow. The red Poppy is a symbol of Remembrance in Britain and across much of the Commonwealth.

In France though it is the Cornflower that is the flower of solidarity and remembrance. Cornflowers, or Les Bleuets, are particularly appropriate this year as it was in 1916 that the French Army adopted an 'horizon blue' uniform for their troops replacing one with very vivid, and very easily seen, bright red trousers. It was also in 1916, much earlier than the Poppy, that Les Bleuets were adopted as symbols of remembrance. This poem dates from that time:

*Les voici les p'tits « Bleuets »  
Les Bleuets couleur des cieux  
Ils vont jolis, gais et coquets,  
Car ils n'ont pas froid aux yeux.  
En avant partez joyeux ;  
Partez, amis, au revoir !  
Salut à vous, les petits « bleus »,  
Petits « bleuets », vous notre espoir ! »*

These here, these little "Bleuets"  
These Bleuets the colour of the sky,  
Are beautiful, gay, stylish,  
Because they are not afraid.  
Merrily, go forward  
Go on, my friends, so long!  
Good luck for you, little "blues"  
Little "bleuets," you are our hope!

Alphonse Bourgin, from 'Bleuets de France', 1916

This Remembrance 'tide let us remember all those who have died in war from all nations, faiths and races. Let us pray for those caught up in conflict today and remember to pray for our enemies too.



# Mike's message .....

## A very different Advent!

Advent is here! The four Sundays that lead up to Christmas are a season in themselves. A time of preparation to celebrate again the birth of Jesus, but also to prepare ourselves to meet him in glory.

With Christmas Day falling on a Sunday this year Advent starts as early as it can. It begins on Sunday 27th November. If you've managed to find a Christian Advent Calendar, as distinct from those that start on 1st December, you'll have a whole extra four days to enjoy it.

I thought we'd do Advent a little differently this year. Part of our preparation to meet Jesus Christ in glory is to ensure we live lives in which we practice loving our neighbour and care for all in need. During Advent we'll be collecting for the Food Bank. Instead of our usual Advent Candles there'll be a basket for each Sunday with a candle alongside. As the candle is lit people can bring forward a donation of goods for the Food Bank. I've tried to link ideas for donations to the readings of the day. I hope that you have as much fun choosing items as I did thinking of categories.

In order that you can buy ahead here are the themes for the four Sundays:

**Sunday 27th November: Canned Goods**, especially fish (sardines, salmon etc)  
*Jesus saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting their nets into the sea, for they were fishermen (Matthew 4 .18)*

**Sunday 4th December: Dried Goods**, especially pasta, and crackers  
*He will gather the wheat into the granary (Matthew 3 .12)*

**Sunday 11th December: Toiletries**, especially soap, shampoo and baby items  
*Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees (Isaiah 35 .3)*

**Sunday 18th December: Treats**, such as sweet things like chocolate and biscuits  
*He shall eat curds and honey (Isaiah 7 .15)*

We are always happy to receive any donations of items for the food bank of course, regardless of week, theme or reading. Please bring what you can for those in need.

Have a very Happy and Holy Advent that we may be ready to celebrate a Christmas full of joy when it arrives.

