

# Mike's message .....

## From the Manger to the Cross

As I write this there's still a week to go to Christmas and it seems strange to be turning our attention to ..... Lent!

Easter is fairly early this year, write it in your diary for 1st April if you haven't already, and Ash Wednesday falls on 14th February. Valentine's Day and April Fools Day!

Make of that what you will. Just before Lent starts we have the Feast of Candlemass. It's 2nd February, a Friday this year, and it's also often the theme of the closest Sunday. It's when the Christmas and Epiphany season ends and we hear the last of the readings from the Gospel accounts of the first Christmas. It's also called The Presentation of Christ in the Temple and we'll hear of the infant Jesus being taken to the Jerusalem Temple by Mary and Joseph in thanksgiving for his birth. (Luke 2 .22 - 38). The reading contains the chilling prophecy of an old Holy Man, Simeon, who tells Mary:

*"This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce you own soul too"*

(Luke 2 .34,35)

That passage reminds us that we can't stay by the manger with all the cosy memories of Christmas, but that we need to turn our thoughts towards the starkness of the Cross and Jesus' death and resurrection.

In his hauntingly beautiful carol "Born in the Night" Methodist minister Geoffrey Ainger helps us to make this shift in focus. It's a carol I like to use at Candlemass as we turn our focus from Christmas towards Lent:

*Truth of our life,  
Mary's child,  
you tell us God is good;  
prove it is true,  
Mary's child,  
go to your cross of wood.*

(Born in the Night, verse 3)

What does Jesus mean to you? Is he the fragile infant in the manger or the broken and executed man on the Cross? The Word that existed before time began, or the Risen and glorified Lord? Or one of the many other ways of understanding who Jesus is. For most of us I suppose he's all of these, and more. AS this month we link the Manger and the Cross we embrace the life of Jesus; who was born among us, lived as one of us, died for us and rose again.



# Mike's message .....

## May Days!

May Day is a special day with origins as a Spring Festival going back many centuries and, from the nineteenth century onwards, also observed as International Workers Day. This year May also contains three very special Christian festivals, the dates of which vary each year as they are linked to Easter.



The first of these, forty days after Easter, is **Ascension Day** (Thursday 10th May). According to Luke the Risen Jesus ended his earthly presence by 'ascending' into heaven. In Luke's 'Acts of the Apostles' (Chapter 1 vv 9-11), this took place forty days after the Resurrection. Luke also has a different account, in his Gospel (24 .50-53), where Jesus' departure is sooner after Easter. (cf Mark 16.19).

The language of 'ascending into heaven' is strange to us. It comes from an age when heaven was 'up there', hell 'down below' and the earth was in between. Someone once described the idea of the Ascension as 'Cape Canaveral Theology' with Jesus 'blasting off' into space! That's how art often depicts it, and an ornate plaster ceiling in Rome has only Jesus' feet visible, sticking out below a cloud! So what are we to make of The Ascension?

When we celebrate the birth of Jesus we talk of God affirming the sanctity of human life by becoming part of it in the person of Jesus Christ. At Ascension the Risen Christ, still bearing the marks of human suffering on his hands, feet and side, carries the realities of our human lives into the very heart of God. Charles Wesley reflected on this in this famous Ascension Day hymn, one verse of which reads:

See! he lifts his hands above; Alleluia!  
See! he shows the prints of love. Alleluia!  
Hark! his gracious lips bestow, Alleluia!  
Blessings on his Church below. Alleluia!

In his ministry Jesus spoke about sending a 'blessing' to his people. He'd spoken about an Advocate or helper (John 14 .25ff). It's this gift that we observe at **Pentecost** (Sunday 20th May) which used to be called 'Whit Sunday'. The name Pentecost also refers to a Jewish harvest festival held 50 days, hence the name, after Passover. The disciples were celebrating this when they received the gift Jesus spoke of which we refer to as the Holy Spirit. Luke records this in Acts (Chapter 2) but again there's an alternative interpretation, by John, that the Holy Spirit was given on Easter Day itself! (John 20 .19-23).

The third special day is **Trinity Sunday** (Sunday 27th May). This is least 'scriptural' of the days as the formulation of the idea of 'Trinity', God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, was a development of the early Christian Church (see Matthew 28.19 where it's believed to be added as a 'postscript'). One God in three persons? That needs an article of it's own!

# Mike's message .....

## “City of Sanctuary”

At the time of writing the news is focussing on ‘Aquarius’, a rescue boat in the Mediterranean that had up to 900 people crowded on it after they were saved from smaller, fragile vessels. Italy and Malta, refused to allow it to dock. Now Spain has offered them safe haven. But thousands more are still at risk, and thousands more have already perished.



In 2005 a movement called ‘City of Sanctuary’ was started. It holds the vision that the UK will be a welcoming place of safety for all and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution. This year 24th June was observed as ‘Sanctuary Sunday’ although we focussed on it a week earlier at the beginning of ‘Refugee Week’

A ‘refugee’ is someone seeking refuge, looking for a place of safety, of sanctuary or asylum, away from harm. It is an age-old concept and ever present need. Sadly some groups want to portray refugees and asylum seekers in negative ways and seek to stir up hatred and suspicion.

I have been in Refugee camps twice. In 1991, on a visit to Hong Kong, I visited RAF Sek Kong Detention Centre. There 9000 men, women and children were crammed into an area 900 metres by 150 metres on a disused runway. They were Vietnamese ‘Boat People’, most were Buddhist but a sizeable minority were Christian (mainly Roman Catholic). Back in the UK, as part of my theological training, I was involved with a placement in Handsworth helping Vietnamese Roman Catholics to settle here and learn English.

In 1994 I was in Sri Lanka for a month where I was studying the role of the church in reconciliation, in the context of the civil war that was raging there. On a visit to the war area I saw many displaced people but it was in Colombo, the capital, where we visited a camp. That one was in a hall, barely bigger than The Cotteridge Church’s Malvern Room, and was ‘home’ to 450 people comprising 149 families, each family being allocated a 2 metre by 2 metre ‘booth’. They were Tamils who had fled from the war torn north of Sri Lanka. Most were Hindu but again there were a minority who were Christian (again mainly Roman Catholic) and also a few Muslims.

Those who we see today in boats trying to cross The Mediterranean, are often of many different nationalities and faiths, even in the same boat. They all have different stories to tell. Some are fleeing war and violence, some have been victims of extortionate ‘promises’ of wealth across the sea - ripped off by those who have cast them adrift after taking their money for ‘safe passage’. Others are being trafficked and sold into slavery.

One of the glories of Britain is that, throughout the centuries, it has offered a haven to those seeking safety and sanctuary. Many of them have gone on to make valuable contributions to the life of this country; in science, art, technology, medicine and within the communities in which they have settled. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13 .2)

For the papers about my visits in Hong Kong and Sri Lanka, and more about City of Sanctuary, go to:  
[www.mjclaridge.co.uk](http://www.mjclaridge.co.uk)

## 100 Days of Prayer

One hundred years ago Europe, and because of colonialism much of the world beyond, was embroiled in a bitter, bloody war that had already ensued for four years. Millions had died. Communities had lost men and women of a whole generation in the bloodshed. In France and Belgium whole villages had been wiped from the map. It was in this context that, on 4 August 1918, King George V called a National Day of Prayer. 100 days later the fighting ceased and 'The Great War' came towards its end.

The last soldiers went 'over the top' at 4.20am on 11th November 1918. Forty minutes later at 5.00am, in a railway carriage deep in the Forest of Compiègne, north of Paris, the Armistice was signed. It agreed that the guns would fall silent at 11.00am. In the time between the signing and the implementation 2738 soldiers died on the Western Front. The armistice would be renewed three times in the following months before the Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28th June 1919 and the war was formally brought to an end.

This year Remembrance Sunday is 11th November, exactly one hundred years to the day since the Armistice. The time from 4th August, the centenary of George V's National Day of Prayer, to Remembrance Sunday is being observed as 100 days of Prayer. Prayer and meditation resources are online at <https://www.remembrance100.co.uk/100-days/> and we're making some printed copies available week by week in The Pennine Way.

There's a danger that occasions such as this can become merely times of reminiscence or, worse still, that events can become some sort of national jingoistic occasion.

The theme of 100 Days of Prayer seeks to use history in the right way. It helps us to reflect on the past and, using what we learn, to strengthen us to bring hope for the future. The material encourages us to be instruments of reconciliation, crossing borders and barriers, radical in our generosity and welcome.

You can visit the railway carriage in which the Armistice was signed. It's in the Forest of Compiègne where the event happened. It hasn't always been there though. It went back into service before Hitler took it back to Compiègne to use it for the French Government to sign a surrender in 1940. It then moved around Europe in 'safe keeping' until it was destroyed, either by the SS or an RAF bomb, accounts vary. The one you see today is a bit like 'Triggers Broom' in *Only Fools and Horses* - it's had new everything. Well except for the bogies (wheels and chassis) which are said to be original.

It may seem disrespectful to mention a comedy programme but that series included a very poignant and quote. In an early episode the character 'Grandad' is reflecting on his memories of the end of The Great War. He recalls Victory Celebrations from which the horrifically wounded were excluded or hidden away. But he remembers seeing them arriving at the station, including those who were blind or lacking limbs. Then he said: "They promised us homes fit for heroes. They gave us heroes fit for homes". That scene, and the final slow motion scene in 'Blackadder Goes Forth' when the characters go "over the top" and the screen fades to poppies, always bring tears to my eyes.

Let us reflect on the horrors of the past, and the causes of them, and use them to bring hope for the future as we renew our commitment to bringing peace and reconciliation.

Revd Mike Claridge

# Mike's message .....

## What do you believe?

I know it may seem a strange question but, "What do you believe?". I don't mean "what do you think you should believe? But what do you actually believe?"

Sometimes the Church (and I mean the Church in it's widest sense, not just The Cotteridge Church) gives the impression that, if you going to belong, you must believe in a whole range of statements. You can be assured that, when you stand in church on a Sunday morning, and we say the prayers and sing the hymns there will be others, like you, that are thinking, "Really?" Or, "Do I believe that?"

As individuals we shouldn't be made to believe but here are religious groups that do precisely that. The mainstream churches would refer to them as cults. Cults manipulate their followers almost by "brainwashing". How then do we compare and cope with belief?

We need to think of belief as personal. An individual's belief - your belief, my belief - is only part of the wider belief of the Church. That's why, when we stand together as a church congregation, we can say certain things together. It's the collective belief of the Church, and individual members may have certain differences in the detail of that belief. It's a little like politics. Yes really! In politics a particular group, such as the Cabinet, may have individual opinions but they need to act together. It doesn't mean that those individual opinions are invalid or less important. If they are sincerely held, they are sincerely held. The same goes with what we believe, or don't believe.

Belief also changes throughout our lives. Every experience that we have can adapt, change, mould or in other ways influence our belief. Part of our belief system is faith. I suppose if I had to explain the differences between belief and faith I would say that belief is the way we put things into words, faith is the feeling we get when we think about it.

Another question. What is the opposite of faith or belief?

The usual answer that you get when you ask that question is that the opposite of faith is doubt. I disagree with that. In fact I'd go so far as to say that the opposite of faith is certainty! I believe faith (and belief) is a journey of exploration. If we are certain of something we stop looking. In regards to our faith it is only right, and very necessary, that we think, explore, develop, test and experiment with what we believe. In that religion and science share common ground. There is always something new to explore.

We'll be running some sessions during the winter to discuss what we believe; about Jesus, God, the Church, Creation, Suffering ... You name it and we'll discuss it! Look out for details and come and explore with us. For those that want it to this will form the preparation for our Membership and Confirmation Service on Sunday 3rd February 2019.

