

# Mike's message .....

## Lockdown thoughts .....

Well here we are. One year on and we're still in this strange world of lock-down. Of course we've been in and out of restrictions, or rather the nature of restrictions has changed, several times since we entered the first lockdown on 23rd March last year.

I wish that I could offer you a date that we might be able to worship again in the church building - but I can't. Any prediction would be sheer guesswork. For now I'm working on the basis that worship will remain online for all of March and April. That's why I haven't prepared a "Preaching Plan" and neither have the Circuit. Maybe as we approach May there will be light at the end of the tunnel. In the meantime we need to ensure that whatever light we do glimpse in the tunnel we proceed cautiously in case it's a train coming the other way! That's what happened in December when the Government were trying to lead us all in singing and dancing, taking credit for the arrival of the vaccine, and that they'd solved everything. Then they loosened restrictions at Christmas and the light in the tunnel turned out to be a whole range of new Covid19 variants coming straight at us.

I know that lockdown is particularly difficult for those who aren't online. I thank the hard working volunteers who are distributing printed material weekly so that everyone remains in contact.

None of us like lockdown but we owe it to those of our church members who work in the NHS, especially the hospitals, to do everything we can to make sure that this time the virus is under control before we 'open up'. Some of those members are absolutely broken by workload and what they've witnessed on the wards.

We owe them and each other something else too. When your turn comes round please, please have the vaccine. A lot of negative rumours have been spread about vaccines - those rumours are downright untrue. If there are people, even family, who are trying to persuade you not to have the vaccine, ignore them. If false preachers say "God will protect so you don't need the vaccine", remind them that we were warned about false teachers (eg 2 Peter 2 .1). If they quote Psalm 91 at you, as some have been doing, tell them that it simply isn't true.

What is true though is that even today God is still revealed in miracles. But instead of being carried out by wandering prophets, miracles today are worked by scientists and medics. What has been achieved in the last year; in vaccines to prevent infection, medication and treatment for those already infected, and knowledge about Covid19, are miracles of the present age. The NHS and scientists are the miracle workers of today.



# Mike's message .....

## Ascension and the Empty Tomb

It seems an age since Easter Day! By the time you read this online or in printed form it'll be the best part of a month since you cracked open your Easter eggs or cut your first slice of Simnel cake.

A month passing by means that Ascension Day is approaching (13th May this year).

Most of what we know about The Ascension is from Luke. He gives us two, differing, accounts in his Gospel (24.50-53) and his Acts of the Apostles (1.6-11). Matthew doesn't mention 'ascension' at all, merely a departure (28.16-20). In the earliest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel there's no mention of it either, indeed there aren't any resurrection accounts at all! He tells us only of frightened disciples gathered around an empty tomb (16.8) - more of that later. Some later manuscripts have the ascension added (16.19-20).

What about John's Gospel? John has no account of the ascension as such but we have this from the account of the first Easter Day. After Mary Magdalene has encountered Jesus, risen from the dead, in the garden he says this:

*(John, Chapter 20)*

17 Jesus said to Mary, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Jesus said, "Do not hold onto me". What are we to make of that? He is saying don't cling to the past, what has been and gone. It's time to move on to new things. Go and tell the others to get ready.

Mark finished his Gospel depicting the women disciples full of fear as they gathered around the empty tomb. But those who heard Mark's Gospel proclaimed to them would have known it was not the end of the story. Frightened disciples would soon be transformed - the Holy Spirit would see to that. But Mark was writing for a community experiencing turmoil. The women's fear would strike a chord with them, maybe it does with us too.

As things change and, for the time being, we come out of lockdown, we need to encourage one another not to cling onto what has been. Not to try and return to everything that we did in the past or at least not in the same ways. We are not people of the empty tomb, rummaging around trying to find what has been and gone. We are people of the resurrection. The physical Jesus has ascended - we are now his body on earth, his community of faith, the church. We don't know what lies ahead but we do know that it'll be different but wherever it takes us - God is with us!



# Mike's message .....



## History is all around us.

History is all around us. That thought has occurred too me time and time again over the last 16 months or so since Covid19 restrictions started.

For one reason it's because I've been producing weekly videos, reflecting on the week's biblical theme, and often drawing on local history to emphasis the theme. For another reason because latterly I've started trying to walk 10,000 steps most days (around five miles), and when you're out walking you see things you certainly wouldn't see when driving.

In Kings Norton of course there are the large prominent historic buildings around, and including, St Nicolas Church. Delve deeply and they are linked to both the 15th century wool trade and, in several different ways, the 17th century English Civil War. Down the road from there the early 19th century Guillotine Locks can be found and there's also the site, although not marked, of where the Royal Mint produced coins early in the 20th century. There are smaller signs too, the marks where ropes have dug into bridge arches while pulling narrowboats along the canal. Small and large, history leaves its mark.

History is all around us, and not just geographically. It's around us in the sense of time too. History is being made as we speak. We read and learn about Tudors and Stuarts, Black Death and Civil War. Doubtless future generations will read about the Covid19 Pandemic. What will they make of these times? What will be the legacy that we leave as we hopefully emerge from them.

The events of history are so often just written by either the victors, in the case of war, or the rich and powerful, in the case of virtually everything else. You have to dig deep sometimes to find the truth. That's what lies behind much of the discussion about statues for example. People portrayed as 'the great and good' sometimes hide appalling atrocities committed by them or in their name. This isn't 'rewriting history' as some claim, it's rather revealing the truths buried in history. The legacy of Clive of India including statues in Shrewsbury and on Whitehall aren't only controversial today. It's shocking they were erected in the first place. Samuel Johnson, commenting on Clive's suspicious death said that he "had acquired his fortune by such crimes that his consciousness of them impelled him to cut his own throat". MPs impeached him from his role in the East India Company. But this isn't just about the past, Clive of India's pet tortoise only died in a Kolkata Zoo in 2006 (aged somewhere between 150 and 250!). History is that close. In fact closer. The poisoned legacy of atrocities of the past lives in the conflicts, hardships and injustices that millions face today. We live with history; warts and all.

What legacy of history will we leave for future generations? How will history remember us and the days of Covid19? History is indeed all around. We can write it, lets hope future generations have cause to remember us well..

# Mike's message .....

## Issues matrimonial

We don't get many weddings here at The Cotteridge Church. Even so I recently had to pay a visit to Birmingham Register Office on wedding related matters. More about why in a moment.

While I was there the Registrar asked if we had many weddings. I explained that as far as location is concerned we are sandwiched between "Cadbury's Theme Park" Bournville and "Mediaeval Building Theme Park" Kings Norton. All we can offer is a busy traffic island! A bit flippant maybe but surroundings, and our lack of parking, don't make us the most attractive of nuptial venues for anyone other than the most faithful of church members.

My visit was to hand over our Marriage Registers, both the Church of England and Authorised Person (Methodist and URC) ones. Back on 1st May the procedure for registering marriages changed. The first significant change since 1837! There are no longer any registers to sign. Instead a printed schedule with all the details of the couple, occupations, parents, addresses etc is obtained and, at the ceremony, the couple, witnesses and minister all sign it. The document has to be returned to the Register Office as soon as possible after the service. Only then, within 14 days, do the couple get their Marriage Certificate, whereas before they were given it on the day. I'm not convinced the changes are for the better, and the delay in issuing the certificate can be problematical for some couples. One good thing though, the details registered on the schedule now include the names of the mothers of both the bride and groom - which marriage registers didn't.

The registrar asked, "Are you fully familiar with the new system?" I told him I'd watched the instructional videos but would brush up my knowledge in the event we actually get a wedding or I take one elsewhere. By the way, under C of E procedures, Banns remain the "preliminary to marriage" so you'll still be hearing those called in church from time to time.

The two systems, Church of England marriage and Authorised Person marriage, are very different in how the schedule is produced. As a result I had two lots of videos to watch! Both here, and in my previous appointment at West Bromwich, I've been registered to conduct weddings under either system. Which brings me to the other recent change.

At its Conference at the end of June The Methodist Church agreed that its buildings could be used for, and ministers could officiate at, same-sex marriages. In doing so The Methodist Church has followed the decision the URC made a few years ago. As an Ecumenical Partnership our situation is complicated somewhat by the C of E, which is still a long way off making a decision. I am hoping that our building can be registered to do same-sex marriages, even before the C of E agree or otherwise, and that, in my role as an Authorised Person, I can be registered to officiate at ceremonies here or elsewhere. Legalities may intervene so we'll have to wait and see.



# Mike's message .....

## COP26

As this magazine goes to press in the last week of October attention is beginning to turn towards the COP26 summit in Glasgow.

The churches are deeply involved in COP26. The Church of Scotland (a Presbyterian church) is leading the churches role with the ecumenical group Glasgow Churches Together co-ordinating activities that include worship, advocacy (keeping the pressure on governments to act), and even hosting Climate Guests - as many campaigners are heading there too.

COP26 stands for 'The 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties' and run from 31st October - 12th November. It's expected that at least 120 Heads of State will be there and its the biggest conference that's ever been held in Glasgow.

Why are the churches involved in COP26?

Combating Climate Change is an urgent issue. Changes in climate affect everyone, but the poorest nations and peoples are affected most. Deserts advance and destroy already struggling farming communities and livelihoods. Sea levels rise and flood whole cities and other communities? Two areas most affected by these are sub-Saharan Africa and the Ganges Delta in Bangladesh. The latter is densely populated and, as close to sea level, very vulnerable. Elsewhere in south Asia the Maldives are in danger of losing their existence all together.

Climate change, and rising sea levels, have other effects too. Millions of people are already having to move. Millions more will follow. There will be pressure on food and clean water supplies. In turn that destabilises whole areas of the world leading to violence and war.

In the Gospels Jesus teaches us that we are to 'Love God and love our neighbour as ourselves'. Our neighbours are all the inhabitants of this planet. We need to take actions that can lessen the effects of Climate Change. Here at The Cotteridge Church we have an Eco-Group working to see how we, as a church community, can make changes to reduce emissions of CO2. That involves things such as improving our recycling and reviewing how we provide heat and lighting.

Please pray for COP26 and, after 12th November, for the implementation of measures to reduce CO2 emissions. Pray also for each other and yourselves in helping with the task. We have a global community, let us care for this planet - our only home.

