

Mike's message

Happy New Year

I'm writing this as 2024 enters its first week. I know that many people will not be sad to have seen 2023 come to an end. Perhaps the most positive thing to say about it is that 'we got through it'. As in all years there are those who will have encountered personal tragedies and bereavements in the last twelve months and for whom memories of 2023 will always be darkened by sadness.



The wider world situation looks bleak. 2023 saw the continuation of the horrific war in Ukraine. Then in October conflict in Palestine escalated to unprecedented levels and continues as I write. In the latter we at The Cotteridge Church have found ourselves in the middle of protest about Palestine-Israel with two big demonstrations outside our church building in November and December. People want their voices to be heard, and protest is important, but it's also vital that in itself it doesn't stifle the voices of needs of others.

Climate Change continues to be a cause of urgent concern too. We are endeavouring to play our part in the Eco Church movement and now have achieved both bronze and silver awards. This has involved looking at all aspects of our building and its activities. Thanks go to the Eco Group for the hard work they continue to put in.

Now 2024 lies open before us. Elections, both in the UK, where a General Election has to take place before the end of January next year (2025), and a Presidential election in the USA in November this year, will have big effects on the wider world. The churches, and others of faith, will have a need to make their voice heard. Far too much of politics today is intolerant of groups and individuals whose background is different to 'ours' - whatever 'ours' is. It is frightening to see how those in need, especially refugees and those in need of asylum, have been derided and ridiculed.

These are concerning times. How can Christians witness effectively about Christ as Light of the World? How can we show, and encourage others to show, the love of Christ that knows no boundaries of race, faith or nation?

As we entered 2024 we celebrated again the great Christian Feast of Epiphany. It's the time when we recall the Magi arriving to worship the Infant Jesus. In Matthew, Chapter 2 we are reminded that the atrocities we see today aren't new. As we see the horrors unfold in Palestine we are reminded of the genocide carried out by Herod. Matthew also tells us how Mary, Joseph and Jesus sought asylum in first Egypt and then were displaced to Nazareth. Note: In Matthew's Gospel Bethlehem is their home, they end up in Nazareth to avoid Herod's tyrant successor.

As 2024 progresses let us continue to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, the "light that darkness can not overcome".

Mike's message

From the mouths of babes ..

Many years ago, we're talking last century (although only just), I was privileged to attend a two week course at St George's House, Windsor. St George's House (stgeorghouse.org) was established by the late Duke of Edinburgh as a place for dialogue between the Christian faith, science, and society. Its website says: "A place where wisdom is nurtured through dialogue, high-quality disagreement is prized and significant topics are discussed seriously through Consultations". It's in the grounds of Windsor Castle, tucked away by St George's Chapel. Indeed the bit of the structure that's nearest is the side chapel where the late Queen Elizabeth II is buried.



Back to the course. Rather worryingly, as I'd only been ordained for four years, it was entitled a "Mid-Service Clergy Course"! Not withstanding that some of us are still around nearly thirty years later. One of my colleagues on the course was a certain Stephen Cottrell. Then a Vicar but now Archbishop of York. I can confirm that he tells a good joke and stands his round in the pub. He tells a good story too and I was reminded of this recently when he did 'Pause for Thought' on Radio Two (20th February, and available of BBC Sounds).

He spoke about how he enjoys visiting schools and in particular the Question and Answer sessions with pupils. On a recent visit he was asked "How old are you?", "As old as my tongue and a bit older than my teeth". "How much do you earn?", "More than a postman, less than the Prime Minister". Then the usual "What do you do?". The Archbishop explained how he was a voice for the Christian faith in northern England, and how an important part of his job was caring for all the Vicars while they are caring for other people. It was then that a boy aged about six put his hand up to ask a question he'd never been asked before, "Who cares for you?"

The Archbishop answered by saying he had a team of people who helped support and care for him, and a loving family too. But also that he knew that God cares for him, indeed the message of the Christian faith is that God cares for everyone - even for those who feel they have no one to care for them.

The Archbishop then thanked the boy for asking and said it was a very kind question that left him feeling that he was being cared for right there and then. We should all remember that boy's question and ask people "Who cares for you?". Because just asking it is such a caring thing.

Mike's message

Ascension Day (9th May)

Exactly forty days after the great feast of Easter comes Ascension Day. That means that out always falls on a Thursday and doesn't always get the prominence it deserves.

Ascension Day is when, according to scripture, the Risen Jesus ended his earthly presence by 'ascending' into heaven. According to Luke in 'Acts of the Apostles' (Chapter 1 vv 9-11), this took place forty days after the Resurrection. Luke does have another account though, in his Gospel (24 .50-53), where Jesus' departure is sooner after Easter. (see also Mark 16.19).

The language of 'ascending into heaven' is strange to us these days. It comes from an age when heaven was 'up there', hell 'down below' and the earth was in between. Someone once called a literal reading of scriptures describing the Ascension as 'Cape Canaveral Theology' with Jesus 'blasting off' into space! That's how many old paintings depict 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 beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, at Christmas, we talk of God-became-Flesh (a human being). God sanctifies all 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 which includes the following two verses:

Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia!
to his throne above the skies; Alleluia!
Christ, the Lamb for sinners given, Alleluia!
enters now the highest heaven! Alleluia!

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!

(For a link to an online service on Ascension Day evening (7.30pm) contact me on mike.claridge@thecotteridgechurch.org.uk or via www.mjclaridge.co.uk)



Mike's message

Resume your journey

“You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Resume your journey” (Deuteronomy 1 .6,7)

On Sunday 23rd June I had the pleasure and privilege of preaching at the Methodist Circuit Service at The Church at Carrs Lane where we said our farewells to four ministers who are, in different ways, ‘resuming their journeys. I took the above verse from Deuteronomy as my text. One of the four ministers was the Revd Nick Jones, well known at Cotteridge, the others were Alison Richards, Sue Shortman and Deb Humphries. I spoke about how, when we move, there are things that have to be left behind, things we take with us on the journey, and things that we find when we arrive.

I talked then about Francis Asbury, an 18th Century Methodist preacher, later minister then bishop, who'd been born in Hamstead, grew up in West Bromwich and was inspired by John Wesley's preaching. Asbury impressed Wesley too. In his teens Asbury became a class leader in West Bromwich, then preacher and then Circuit Rider (travelling widely preaching) in Staffordshire, Northamptonshire and Wiltshire, among other places. At the age of twenty-six he accepted Wesley's challenge to go to a new Circuit - simply called America.

Asbury said tearful farewells to his parents and set sail. He never returned to these shores, even staying in America during the War of Independence - he's believed to be the only English preacher to have done so. The Church of England, and John Wesley, instructed their preachers to return. Asbury was having none of it.

When Asbury set sail on 4th September 1771, from the village port of Pill near Bristol, a seven-and-a-half week Atlantic crossing lay ahead. A week into this, on 12th September, he wrote in his journal;

*Whither am I going? To the New World.
What to do? To gain honour?
No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No;
I am going to live to God and to bring others to do so.”*

I suggested in my sermon that was a very appropriate text to take with us wherever we journey. It both challenges and inspires us. Wherever we go, let us remember:

I am going to live to God and bring others to do so.



Mike's message

Farewell

In the last edition of 'Roundabout' I wrote about 'moving on'. I had recently preached at a service for those leaving the Birmingham Methodist Circuit this summer, and took my theme for my letter from that sermon. I already knew then, but wasn't yet able to say, that I too would be moving on soon.



This is my last letter for the The Cotteridge Church's 'Roundabout' magazine because I will be retiring at the end of October. I hope that you'll be able to come along for my final service on Sunday 27th October at 10.30am. It's a service of Holy Communion, led by myself, and the preacher will be Sue Spencer.

I'm in my eighth year of ministry at The Cotteridge Church, having arrived in March 2017. Like ministry anywhere it's been a time of both challenge and joy. We came through the pandemic together and adapted to new ways of worship and serving Christ in our witness and ministry.

It's been a privilege to be part of the ministry of all three denominations here; Methodist, Church of England, and United Reformed Church. As I prepare to leave I am trying to ensure that all three denominations talk to each other to discern the way forward for The Cotteridge Church. In all likelihood The Cotteridge Church will not get a minister 'all to itself', very few congregations do these days, but being part of three denominations will give strength, and sharing ministry would bring added riches of tradition and new ideas. But all that is for the JCC and others to discuss and decide. The excellent three year Strategic Plan recently adopted by the Church Council lays down a clear, bold, and exciting pathway for the next stage in The Cotteridge Church's story.

As for my story, I am hoping to continue that in retirement by offering some preaching appointments on my new local Methodist Circuit. I also want to pursue other interests and activities. I'm hoping to restart my local history and faith videos called 'Coal, Iron, Lime ... and a bit of Gospel' which are in abeyance at the moment.

On behalf of Susan and myself thank you to all with whom we have shared ministry at The Cotteridge Church. You will be in our prayers as your journey on.