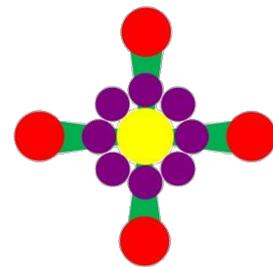


# **The Benefice of Harden, Wilsden, Cullingworth, Denholme 23 December 2020**



## **Letter from Richard**

It has been quite a week so far! Since this time last week there has been a phenomenal amount of change. We have learned about this new variant of the virus which transmits more easily. We have a new Tier 4 added as an increased measure above the Tier 3 restriction level. The freedom of movement and social interaction relaxation has been greatly reduced and limited to just Christmas Day itself. We have seen people stuck away from friends and family and our borders with other countries locked, creating queues of traffic, stranded travellers and limited movement of goods. It has not been a good week.

It will certainly be a Christmas that we never forget! Thankfully, as I write this, the numbers of positive cases in the Bradford area are continuing to fall. Whether that will continue in the weeks to come, remains to be seen. It is though something positive, along with the passing of the shortest day and the shift of our alignment with the sun to begin our journey towards spring and summer. Let us hope that by then we will see very positive changes from the growing vaccination programme.

We have been given many false hopes over the past months. There have been many times that we have been told of better days, normal Christmases, no more lockdowns, only to have those hopes dashed by the reality of the changing situation.

I can no longer count too, the number of times that I have read the words "Christmas is cancelled!" Thankfully, I am pleased to assure you that it very much is not cancelled. The way we celebrate it must necessarily be changed and that is particularly hard for many. But more than ever, the breaking in of the Christmas light and truth into the troubles and trials of the world is seen to be a firm and solid hope.

In these final days before Christmas remember all those who are struggling and be aware of the impact this is having on you. And take time to be very conscious of the Hope of Christmas: That in the darkness of life, the light of God comes among us. God is in the very middle of the mayhem and brings his certain hope into the chaos of despair. It can be hard to see it sometimes, but it is surely there. May you see it clearly this Christmas.

## Midweek Worship led by Suzy

Reveal among us the light of your presence  
**that we may behold your power and glory.**

Lord, open our lips

**and we shall praise your name.**

God in Christ has revealed his glory.

**Come let us worship.**

From the rising of the sun to its setting

**The Lord's name is greatly to be praised.**

**Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden:  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Blessed are you, Sovereign God,  
creator of light and darkness,  
to you be glory and praise for ever.  
May your word be a lantern to our feet  
and a light upon our path  
that we may behold your coming among us.  
Strengthen us in our stumbling weakness  
and free our tongues to sing your praise.  
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
**Blessed be God for ever.**

Confession

**Lord our God,  
In our sin we have avoided your call.  
Our love for you is like a morning cloud,  
Like the dew that goes away early.  
Have mercy on us;  
Deliver us from judgement;  
Bind up our wounds and revive us;  
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

May the God of love and power  
Forgive us and free us from our sins,  
Heal and strengthen us by his Spirit,  
And raise us to new life in Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The Word of God

### Psalm 89.1-5

*Truly the Lord is our shield.*

My song shall be always of the loving-kindness of the Lord:  
with my mouth will I proclaim your faithfulness throughout all generations.

**I will declare that your love is established for ever;  
you have set your faithfulness as firm as the heavens.**

For you said: 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one;  
I have sworn an oath to David my servant:

**"Your seed will I establish for ever  
and build up your throne for all generations."**

The heavens praise your wonders, O Lord,  
and your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones;  
*Truly the Lord is our shield.*

### Luke 1:57-66

#### **The Birth of John the Baptist**

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

This is the Gospel of the Lord  
**Praise to you O Christ**

A faithful priest doing his duty and burning incense before the Lord in the sanctuary, I always feel so sorry for Zechariah – he emerges from the temple unable to speak, unable to share what should be a joyful announcement with his wife. He has to go through the whole of Elizabeth's pregnancy unable to speak to her about it. That must have been really hard on both of them. It seems like a severe punishment for a little doubt and confusion. Today we read that he is finally relieved from the silence on the day that the boy is to be circumcised (a whole week after the birth!) and he follows the instructions to name the child John. 'All his neighbours were filled with awe!'

No surprise people wondered what the future held for this child. We all do that don't we? We wonder what the future will hold, and we speculate about the paths before us and our children. It is the root of a profitable industry 'fortune telling' looking into the future and giving people guidance or warnings. As Christians we understand that God sends messengers to guide and warn his people. God sends angels who appear in dreams or in private interviews with momentous news. Many of these encounters are in the Christmas stories but they are echoes of similar stories in the Old Testament and we do read in the letters in the New Testament that God continued to send messengers to the disciples in similar ways. The prophets received messages from God in revelations that are often associated with dreams or trances but sometimes with quite ordinary conversations, during a time of prayer and 'chatting' with God.

It would be wonderful and terrifying to be aware of the future before it happened. Would we really want to know the future?

I have always felt that for both Mary and Elizabeth it is more of a curse than a blessing. The pure enjoyment of each moment is overshadowed by the portentous knowledge that their child is 'chosen' and has a particular purpose in God's plan. Being distinctive and having a driving purpose can make life difficult, not just for the individual but for all those around them. It is a matter of faithful service that both Mary and Elizabeth bear sons who are singled out by God for a mission. They train their boys to be faithful and righteous before God, well educated in the Law and the Prophets, courageous in sharing the message that they have been called to share.

They both hold a special place in my heart, I sorrow for them as mothers who had to let go and watch their boys follow a path that they might not have chosen for them. Aware for too long of a future that they might have been better off not knowing.

We hope and pray about the future. We speculate and we make plans, but we cannot know what the future will hold. Change is a part of life. Risk is a part of life. The most poignant parts of the Christmas story are those in the background who echo Mary, “Here I am a servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your will.”

Probably the most difficult challenge in the Christians life is the letting go of our desire to be in control. We learn to trust God and to allow God to be in control. We must learn to surrender our future to the will of God and pray for God’s guidance in each decision and path we choose through life. It is not easy; it can be difficult – but it is also immensely rewarding when you are confident of God’s guidance and see the results in your life. For God is faithful and just and He cares for us and walks beside us, comforts us, and leads us. I pray for all of us this Christmas that we may be granted the grace of knowing not what the future holds, but that whatever it holds we will have the comfort of Our Lord walking beside us into it. Amen.

## Prayers

Let us pray to Our God who loves us.

Let us pray for the needs of our world and those nations where there are struggles and difficulties at this time. We pray that God will guide those in authority, the leaders of our world’s nations that their decisions may be wise and just. We pray for peace in our world. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Jesus called us to care for the poor and the most vulnerable people.

We remember those we know who are in economic distress, those who have lost their employment and those who are trapped in cycles of despair.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

This Christmas we pray for all those who feel lonely or anxious. We pray for those whose plans have been disrupted; that they may find ways to be together with those they love without endangering others. May they know your blessing and presence with them.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

We are privileged to belong to the household of God.

Help us to care for one another, fill us and our homes with love.

May your blessing be upon our families and may we treat others as though they were our family. Help us to show love and compassion in all we do.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Help us to recognise your presence and to seek to share that understanding with others. We pray for your guidance in all our decisions and your blessing upon them. Open the minds of those who do not know you. Help us to show by words and deeds the faith we have in our hearts.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

*Call to mind anyone you know who is ill or struggling*

We pray that God may reveal the light of his presence to the sick and bring comfort and strengthen them and those who care for them. We pray for your healing and wholeness, for your completion in Jesus name.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Give hope and faith to the bereaved, gentleness to those who minister to them, and courage to those who need it. Bring your presence into situations of loss, loneliness and despair and heal the wounds that feel as though they will never heal.

Merciful Father,

**accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

*And we draw all of our prayers together in the words of the Lord's Prayer.*

Our Father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
On earth, as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
Forgive us our sins,  
As we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory  
are yours, now and forever. Amen.

And may the blessing of God Almighty,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
strengthen and sustain us, and all those whom  
we love, now and forever. **Amen**

# Services for this Special Week

We will be sending out our written weekly service sheets

## Christmas Eve



### **4.00pm Christingle Services on Zoom:**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82722183016?pwd=RDJKbFc3aFRyYyt4bmJIMGJ6QU9Ddz09>

Meeting ID: 827 2218 3016      Passcode: 084305

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81594755968?pwd=ckxEZmRBeHVDWEpsd0xjc0ExS1d6UT09>

Meeting ID: 815 9475 5968      Passcode: 905532

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88282042301?pwd=WGdPbGtyeEFxT1dIRVNCNjFweXhMdz09>

Meeting ID: 882 8204 2301      Passcode: 009661

### **11.30pm Midnight Christmas Communion in church**

At least one of our Midnight services will be streamed on Facebook

## Christmas Day

### **9.30am Christmas Morning Family Communion**

At least one of our morning services will be streamed on Facebook

### **10.45am Zoom Family Christmas Morning Service:**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81616380898?pwd=eEJ1dWxiV0xFWlhEUGNxOTdIOHNjdz09>

Meeting ID: 816 1638 0898      Passcode: 687102

## Sunday 27 December: The First Sunday of Christmas

### **10.30am United Benefice Service on Zoom:**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86552726655?pwd=ZnB0VDkwa1c3YVpVZkVjVNHf1UHE4UT09>

Meeting ID: 865 5272 6655      Passcode: 875467

## **THE CHURCHES ARE OPEN ON WEDNESDAY FOR PERSONAL PRAYER**

2pm - 3pm at Wilsden, Cullingworth, Denholme

2.30pm - 3.30pm at Harden

## THANK YOU

This year really has been like no other. Thank you to everyone who has helped in the running of our churches in these strange times. Thank you for your support and generosity. Thank you for your kindness and care. Thank you for your encouragements and for showing and sharing the love of God. We pray God's blessing on us all for the New Year ahead.

Thank you for all the donations received so far towards the work of Inn Churches. I am overjoyed to report that our current total is around £3500. It is a phenomenal figure thanks to people's generosity. We very much hope that the final figure will be even more! You can still give by cheque or transfer, or by going to:

<https://givealittle.co/campaigns/4e9d59b8-af11-4b79-9bdb-96cb5a9e77da>

and find out more about the Inn Churches Online eBay Auction too at:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3856272301098455>

Please help us to get the final figure to over £4000!



## OUR ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS JOURNEY

### TRAVELLING CHRISTMAS CRIB (on our Facebook Page)

The Holy Family arrived in Bethlehem (which looked very like Cullingworth!) this week but there was nowhere to stay. Thankfully a kind Innkeeper offered his stable and they made themselves at home. Just in time! The Baby was born in the stable. The Shepherds were visited by an angel who told them about the special birth. So they set off and made their way to the manger. The Wise men are still on the way and are getting close!



### I SPY ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS (on our Facebook Page)

This week we have had the letters P to V. We have enjoyed Postboxes, Queuing Cats, Radio City, a Santa Duck, Trees, Underneath the trees and Christmas Veg!



### WHITE RIBBONS OF CHRISTMAS WISHES

The White Ribbons are now out at our churches. Perhaps there is someone that you will not be able to see this Christmas or if you have a hope or wish for our community, let us know the names or hopes and we can write them on a white ribbon. We will fly the ribbons outside our churches over Christmas!