

ST. MARY OF NAZARETH /ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI – WEST WICKHAM

13th December 2020: Third Sunday of Advent

Hazel writes:

Not the Big Christmas Sing and Messy Christmas have given us a great start to our celebrations this year. Do look at these if you haven't done so already and join us for an on-line retreat this evening at 6.30pm on Zoom – details below. Next week's pew sheet will be the last of the year.

Next Sunday, 20th December there will be a service of **Holy Communion** in St. Mary's at 8am and then at 10am there will be a carol service in St. Francis and at 4.00 p.m. a carol service in St. Marys. There will also be a service available **on-line** from 10am which combines material from both carol services.

Please bring **Foodbank donations** to the Vicarage or St Francis' Church. Currently Bromley Borough Food Bank need tinned chicken and ham, jelly, instant whip, sponge puddings, and shaving gel. Thank you for your continued support.

Following the Quiet Time for Advent at St John's church on Friday, we have an **on-line mini retreat** on Sunday 13th December from 6.30pm to 8pm, using some of the materials to enable a personal reflection on the Advent theme of hope. A Zoom meeting invitation was included with last week's pew sheet. Please do join us for an opportunity to uncover hope and prepare for our celebration of Christ's birth.

Resources and updates for the week ahead – A video of the service has been posted to the websites for today. All other files have been combined and posted as a pew sheet which has been sent on paper to those who have told us that they are not on-line.

Other worship and resources that you might want to listen to or look at on Sunday:

- The Church of England's national virtual service will be available on their website at www.churchofengland.org. Today at 9.00 a.m. Worship at home for third Sunday of Advent with a Christingle Service.
- The BBC have the following programmes to watch and listen to:
 - Sunday Worship at 8.10am on Radio 4 with Chapel Choir of Methodist College, Belfast
 - Choral Evensong at 3pm on Radio 3 live from Durham Cathedral.
 - On BBC 1: Sunday Worship at 11.30 a.m. Father John Dickson leads an ecumenical service from Royal Holloway, University of London and Songs of Praise at 1.15 p.m. Kate Bottley visits a Christmas Light show in Norfolk with lots of festive carols.

Each week our “**coffee/tea & chat**” on Thursday at 2.30 pm is an opportunity to share with others. This week we will have a Christmas Party before taking a break for a couple of weeks. If you want to join as a one-off, please do. Rowena (rowena.griff19@btinternet.com /020 8777 6112) can give you the log-in details.

Carol singing outside St. Mary’s. To suit those who have responded, this session will be on Tuesday 22nd Dec. at 4pm. Space is limited, but if you’d like to take part, contact Geoff at geoff@mussard.org.uk or 020 8650 8389. Don’t forget your torch and broly.

The **Foodbank Collection** last Saturday gathered a significant amount of donations. On Monday three car loads of gifted items were delivered to the Foodbank warehouse for which they were very grateful. A great weekend for the Foodbank and our two churches.



We are not able to do ‘**Christmas shopping**’ as we normally do this year. If you are looking to support a small local business during these difficult times, do take a look at Jane Coia’s website: www.winsfordhouseproduce.co.uk. Jane is a member of St Francis’ who is a producer of jams, marmalades, pickles and chutneys. The website shows the full range of products and details of how to order. Gift boxes can be made up in any combination.

Thank you from Kati Rees and Barbara Plummer for the lovely gift on our retirement from looking after the St Francis Hall bookings and the Hall for 25 years. We will be sampling the contents of a St Mary’s Christmas Hamper for many weeks to come and it was certainly an inspired choice for two people who enjoy food. The rest of the household thought it was a good idea too.

A **big thank you** to Kay and Geoff for organising and making the delivery of St. Mary's Christmas cards around the parish.

The **St Mary's on-line Christmas Market** made £2,750 which is a great return. Thank you to Gifty and Debbie for master-minding the hampers and publicity and to everyone who contributed to make it a success.

We now have a credit/debit card machine at St. Francis, so any monies being paid **at the Church** can be by cash or card. It is very simple to use !

Bromley Welcare are not collecting toys this year, but would appreciate donations of money. If you feel you would like to donate, please send cheques to Barbara Wilson, 19 Frederick Crescent

London
SW9 6XN

Thank you. Margaret Bond and Merri Womack

Welcare reps for St Mary's

If you have any queries, don't hesitate to get in touch.

Lighting the Lamps.

We need 6 helpers for the service of Lighting the Lamps on Christmas Eve. Please contact David Wada if you feel able to help.

Bromley Borough Foodbank Christmas Hampers

On Saturday 19th December, St Francis is acting as a distribution centre for Bromley Borough Foodbank Christmas Hampers. We need a team of drivers to deliver these hampers. Ideally each driver will take a passenger with them to help with the delivery as parking at some of the homes might be difficult. We are going to have 150 hampers to deliver. If this is something you think you can help with please contact Kim Teare (kim_teare@hotmail.com), Cheryl Davies (bc14-dav@ntlworld.com) or Kate Dyer (katedyer41@hotmail.com).

Thank you in advance to anyone that can spare a few hours to help those less fortunate than ourselves.

Any items for the joint pew sheet to Beryl bbolton@ntlworld.com and items for the websites to brian.griff19@btinternet.com or Gifty office@stmarywestwickham.co.uk.

Collect

God for whom we watch and wait, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son: give us courage to speak the truth, to hunger for justice, and to suffer for the cause of right, with Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading:

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Gospel:

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.
⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' ²¹ And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' ²² Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' ²³ He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"', as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' ²⁶ John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Post Communion Prayer

We give you thanks, O Lord, for these heavenly gifts; kindle in us the fire of your Spirit that when your Christ comes again we may shine as lights before his face; who is alive and reigns now and for ever.

TALK:

Just before last year's General Election, Boris Johnson claimed that he had an "oven-ready" deal just waiting to be implemented to solve our Brexit problems. Nearly a year on, I think it's fair to say that the expectations raised by that claim have yet to be fulfilled.

Now don't worry this isn't going to be a political reflection. But the difference between what is expected and what actually happens lies behind our readings this morning.

Now come with me to Bethany, which as we've just heard, lies on the other side of the Jordan, so this isn't the Bethany two miles from Jerusalem, where Mary and Martha lived with their brother Lazarus and where Jesus stayed in the days between his arrival in Jerusalem on what we know as Palm Sunday and his arrest and trial.

No, this Bethany is twenty miles from Jerusalem and the road to reach it drops a thousand feet on the way. It's difficult terrain.

Yet Mark in his gospel tells us that people from all over Judea and even Jerusalem were flocking there to hear the preaching of John the Baptist, for many a round trip of over 40 miles over difficult roads.

He must have been some speaker!

And what was John's message: to repent of your sins and then be baptised in the Jordan as a sign of having been forgiven. And he had some challenging words to say to those who came to him, as we are told in the other gospels:

"The man with two tunics should share with him who has none and the one who has food should do the same."

Now there's an invitation to go home and check your wardrobe to see if there might be a few items that could be given to Bromley Refugee Centre and to donate to the Bromley food bank, if ever I heard one.

Soldiers were firmly told not to extort money, not to accuse people falsely and to be content with their pay.

But he had even stronger things than that to say.

Imagine walking twenty miles to be asked: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have

Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.’

And it was comments like this that aroused the interest of the religious authorities in Jerusalem, who sent some minor officials to check him out.

But why were the religious authorities worried?

John was baptising people as sign of their having repented of their sins, and as a sign that they had been forgiven. Nothing remarkable in that you might think, except that it was usually only non-Jews who converted to Judaism who were required to be baptised. Jews believed that merely being a member of God’s chosen people, having Abraham as your father, was sufficient for your salvation. But as we’ve heard, John challenged that view.

Moreover, Luke tells us that John was the son of a priest and so a member of the tribe of Levi from whom all priests were drawn.

This would have given his preaching greater authority, but as he was departing from the official line, it also gave the authorities greater cause for concern.

So they sent to ask him who he thought he was, and the way in which they did that needs a little explanation.

From Mark’s gospel we learn that John’s dress and diet – clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and locusts and wild honey for food – was that of the Old Testament prophets.

The last, some 400 years before, had been Malachi, the closing words of whose book, speaking on behalf of God, read: See, I will send my prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.”

There was a common belief that before the coming of the Messiah, the one who would oust the Romans and restore the glory of Israel, Elijah would return to prepare the way. And expectations were high that that might be about to happen.

But no, John wasn’t the Messiah, nor was he Elijah, nor was he the Prophet promised by Moses, who would be the greatest of prophets and restore to the Jews their freedom from occupation, just as Moses had led them to freedom from Egypt.

What the authorities made of John’s answer, we don’t know.

But what we do know is that John was a celebrity – hundreds, if not thousands must have been going to hear him preach. Yet he only regarded himself as the warm-up act preparing the way for one who in his words, and found in all the gospels, John was not fit to even untie the thongs of his sandals.

Untying sandals was the role of a servant, so John is placing himself very low down indeed on the status ladder. What an example of humility!

And no doubt, to go back to my opening comments, his denials of who he was would have dashed the expectations of many in the crowd. Yet, ironically, as Jesus later testified, John, was in a sense, Elijah, in that he did prepare the way for Jesus, who was the Messiah.

But Jesus wasn't the Messiah that John expected. In his preaching, according to Matthew and Luke, he refers to the one who will follow him, Jesus, as having his winnowing fork in his hand, clearing the threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

John's vision of the coming Messiah is of one who is judgemental and punitive. It's telling that when John is thrown into prison, he sends his followers to ask Jesus whether he is indeed the Messiah, or whether they should be expecting someone else.

The evidence provided by Jesus to show that he is the Messiah is that, by him, the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

And this brings us back to our reading from Isaiah, for the evidence which Jesus advances for his Messiah-ship is almost identical to what we heard just now in our reading from that book.

And that's not surprising because at the outset of his ministry, Luke tells us that Jesus on the Sabbath day went into the synagogue in his home town and having been invited to read, chose that passage from Isaiah and having read down as far as "proclaim the year of the Lord's favour," declared that he was the fulfilment of that prophecy.

But note that he stops reading before the words, "and the day of the lord's vengeance." Just as in his reply to John's question, Jesus chooses to focus on the compassionate side of his ministry, so he does in his teaching in the synagogue.

And that's what he asks of us, that we should be compassionate as he is compassionate. Someone who responded to that demand was Mother Teresa, who, basing her words on that passage from Matthew's gospel that Hazel preached on a couple of weeks ago, the parable of the sheep and the goats, said, "God has identified himself with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the homeless;

hunger not only for bread, but for love, for care, to be somebody to someone; nakedness, not for clothing only, but nakedness of that compassion that very few people give to the unknown; homelessness, not only just for a shelter made from stone but for that homelessness that comes from having no one to call your own.

Now that is not to say that Jesus has rejected judgement – there is plenty that Jesus says that relates to judgement, as for example the fate of the goats, in that parable, who are told to depart from the presence of the king, and, of course, part of what we are called to do in Advent is to prepare for Jesus' second coming as king and judge – but it is to say that Jesus' primary focus is not judgement and punishment.

Whereas John the Baptist sets out almost to frighten us into repentance, Jesus wants to love us into doing things God's way, as we can see in the parable of the lost sheep, where we told that when the lost sheep has been found - searched out, not waited for - the shepherd joyfully puts it over his shoulder and goes home, for there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. Another example of how our expectations are upended.

So, then, two lessons for us learn from today's readings: humility and compassion.

Let me finish with a modern parable.

I haven't checked the Christmas TV schedules yet, but I would be surprised if Paddington didn't feature somewhere. You may recall in the first film, and of course in the book, the Brown family are divided over what they should do about a homeless, but very winsome bear who has just arrived in this country from darkest Peru, having stowed away on a liner.

Mr Brown is very practical about the danger of taking an unknown, and therefore unpredictable, bear into the family home.

Mrs Brown, on the other hand, feels sorry for the bear, shows compassion, and provides it with what starts as a temporary home, but soon becomes the now-named Paddington's permanent home.

You could summarise the story as being that of a stowaway from a foreign country who enters Britain illegally but is eventually made welcome and looked after by members of the native population.

I think that story might just have appealed to Jesus, who, you may recall healed both the Roman centurion's servant and the daughter of the gentile Syro-Phoenician woman.

Amen.

Prayer Pointers

Pray that we may find joy in our lives even at the end of this most difficult of years. May we rejoice and give thanks for all the good things God has done for us and give thanks without ceasing. May we not be afraid to tell others the reason for our joy and thanksgiving. Pray that, like John the Baptist, we may prepare the way for God's Kingdom to infuse people's lives and the lives of our community here in West Wickham.

Thank God for the generosity of our community last weekend as people donated food and toiletries for the Bromley Foodbank and for the volunteers from our Men's Group as they received the donations and transported them to the warehouse. Pray for all those who use the Foodbank and all the volunteers who work there.

In this week when the Covid vaccine has begun to be administered, thank God for all those who have worked tirelessly to develop and evaluate the vaccine. Pray for all those who will have the task of working at vaccination centres across the country.

Continue to pray for our Government as they review and make hard decisions about the Covid tiers this coming week and as they wrestle with the EU negotiations. May all their talks and meetings be guided by the need to seek the best for the health and economy of our nation.

For all those who are ill at this time, especially those we know. For all who are preparing to undergo surgery – especially for Valerie Hamilton – and thank God for the skill of surgeons, physicians, nurses and all healthcare professionals who work in our NHS. Continue to pray for all those working on the Covid wards and for those who are feeling stressed and struggling to cope with the difficult cases.

For all those who have died – those we have known and loved and those known to God alone. May those who are bereaved find some joy in the memories their loved ones have left behind. Pray for all those who come to our Bereavement Support Group that they may find comfort and peace in the loving arms of Jesus.