

A Christmas message

As 2022 comes to a close, our hearts go out to the people of Ukraine whose country was invaded by Russia in February. In the months since, we have watched in horror as civilians, cities and infrastructure have been attacked, land occupied and atrocities committed.

The UK has received more than 100,000 people fleeing from the conflict. The gift of their presence among us reminds us that this is no “quarrel in a far away country, between people of whom we know nothing”.

As we recall once again the coming into the world of Jesus at Christmas, our challenge is to connect our celebration of his birth



Credit: Jason Bryant

with the realities and consequences of the conflict that is happening. Sadly, it’s not hard to see the links. Jesus was born in a land (Palestine) that had been annexed by an expansionist foreign power (Rome) in pursuit of its territorial ambitions. The occupiers' demands meant that Jesus’ birth happened not at home in Nazareth, but at a counting centre - Bethlehem. He was born in a stable because ‘there was no room at the inn’. While still a baby, Jesus became a refugee when taken to Egypt due to

warnings of atrocities to come.

Viewed this way, the Christmas story is no sentimental fable. It is a brutal foreshadowing of the events that Ukraine and our world have encountered this year. At the same time, it is also a story of hope. It tells us that even in the very worst that can happen the Christ child whose birth we celebrate knows all too well the realities of the human condition. As a result, in any darkness his light is never extinguished. For he is Emmanuel – God with us.

So as we come to the end of 2022 we give thanks that God is always with us in whatever we face. May he be with Ukraine. May he be with Russia. And may he be welcomed by us all.

A very happy Christmas.
Bishop Michael

News in brief

Bishop Michael gifts 1,000 saplings at installation

Preaching on the reading from the Book of Acts Bishop Michael said in his sermon that his gift was an example of just one of the things we can do to bring about the harvest of God’s life into God’s world and asked all those present “will you plant a sapling as a sign that under God each of us, in every place, can play our part in working for change, for transformation, for life? Small actions that when we undertake them together make a big difference.” ■



Out and about from Bath to Wells

A phrase that has stuck with Bishop Michael from the service when he became a bishop is ‘bishops know their people and their people know them’. As he seeks to live out that sentiment, rather than make a conventional car journey home from attending Morning Prayer at Bath Abbey back to Wells on the morning of his installation, Bishop Michael took a different approach, using different forms of transport and meeting people along the way ■

A service marked with tradition and symbolism

Bishop Michael was installed as 80th Bishop of Bath and Wells wearing the Coronation Cope, originally commissioned for the Coronation of HRH Edward VII in 1902. His Oath of Allegiance to the King was taken on Bishop Robert Creyghtone’s Bible which dates back to 1633, and he received the 15th century episcopal ring ■



You are invited!

Following a series of difficult Christmases, everyone is invited to follow the star and join us at church services and other ways this Christmas.

Why not invite a friend to come along to your church this year? The Talking Jesus Report 2022 indicates that lots of people who are not church-goers are open to receiving an invitation, while many church people are anxious about asking. The Rev Stephen Hance, from the Church of England Vision and Strategy team, suggests considering the three 3Ps before you extend your invitation: Pray before you invite someone (after all it is God who draws people); Prepare (what kind of service is your invitee most

likely to be interested in?) and Petition (in other words, just ask). If that person says no, consider who else may welcome an invitation.

The invitation to join in is not limited to attending church. Why not share the ways they could engage with the reflections for 'Follow the Star: The Great Invitation'? Starting on Christmas Eve and continuing daily (Monday to Saturday) until the Epiphany (6 January), these reflections will help you make space this Christmas. On each of the 12 days, a different contributor will share something that speaks of a Christmas invitation for them, bringing the theme to life through a mixture of personal story, Bible

reading, reflection and challenge. The reflections will be available via email, audio, an app and a printed booklet – so anyone can join in.

As Rev Stephen concludes, "It's a beautiful thought that God can use you and me to invite people into his love this Christmastime – and it's true! So who will you invite?" ■



Offering a warm welcome

The community in and around Wiveliscombe has come together to support their Ukrainian guests.

How did you set up your community support?

When we realised Ukrainian refugees would be coming to our area we realised we would need to have a co-ordinated approach so we set up a community organisation, Wivey Welcomes Refugees to support both Ukrainian guests and their hosts. It wasn't clear how guests and hosts would be matched but in the event the Facebook group, Taunton for Ukraine, we matched about 95% of people.

What support did you offer at first?

Our visitors' first priority was to learn English and that's when we started planning to set up a Welcome Hub. St Andrew's in Wiveliscombe was the first to open their doors to us. They already ran a Café for All on Thursday mornings and made it clear we were



HRH the Countess of Wessex visits St Andrew's to learn about the project.

welcome to come and use their space for whatever we wanted to do. One lesson a week quickly became three.

How did that develop?

The wrap around care is important. The community volunteers come into the lessons to help and also offer friendship and trusted practical support for our visitors. The opportunity to build up friendships

with fellow Ukrainians has also been really important, especially for those who are living out in the countryside and not near any fellow Ukrainians, and that has created a wonderful atmosphere.

What about Christmas?

They are a strong and resilient people but a Christmas away from home will be challenging for our guests and the friendships, hospitality and support will be particularly important. One of our community partners is making plans to celebrate the Orthodox Christmas on 7 January and we hope to follow up the success of our recent joint service with a Ukrainian/British carol service.

Read more: bathwells.anglican.org/wivey-welcomes

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