

I was driving back from a meeting in Dunstable reflecting on what I might write as my Christmas greeting for this magazine. The journey was taking much longer than usual as there was a problem on the M1 and Luton was gridlocked because of it. As I got onto the Lower Luton Road I wondered how far the tailback of traffic would be and found myself praying that God would bless all these people with patience as they had no idea what they were heading into.

I wondered if Mary and Joseph really had any idea what they were heading into as they made their way to Bethlehem? They had no clue what lay ahead of them; from the crowded hotels with no room for a young couple about to have a baby; the birth with the cattle watching on; the strange visitors – shepherds and much later the wise men. They had no idea of the fear the wise ones would instil into Herod or the need to escape for their lives, crossing the border into Egypt, where they stayed until it seemed safe to return. They had no idea what it would be like to bring up this special child or what heartache the future would hold. As they journeyed I wonder if unbeknown to each other their prayer was for God to bless them with all they needed for Mary to give birth safely and all to be well.

I wondered if our prayer is really any different. Do we also ask God to bless us and those we love with all we need each day?

I wondered how God might use us this Christmas to bless our families and friends and people who come to our Christmas events at Church? How might we offer the most precious gifts of faith, hope, joy and peace; if even to just one person?

In the business of this season may God bless us with special moments to allow Christ to be born anew in our hearts that we might see people through his eyes and find him in every person we meet.

May everyone who reads this message be blessed with the gift of knowing they are loved and cherished by God and important to us.

May everyone who comes our way go home with something to treasure in their hearts; a seed sown for God to water and nurture, for faith to grow.

May people who find Christmas a difficult or lonely time will be surprised again by Christ's joy.

May we all be blessed with peace that stubbornly refuses to go away even when there should be no peace. Peace that can only be the presence of the Prince of Peace. God with us.

I pray that the message of Christmas will rekindle hope. God knew what was ahead and still took the risk to walk among us, to understand what it is to be welcomed and adored but also rejected and misunderstood. God knew what was ahead that would open the way for us to find our way back to Love that others too might be blessed with Gods upside down view of the world where the last is first, the hungry are fed, the lost are found, peace becomes a reality, justice is done, and broken hearts are bound.

Its such a simple thing to do but please join me in asking God to bless people with all they need this Christmas. We can never know what lies ahead but the good news is that Immanuel – God is with us – bringing light even to the darkest night.

May the Light of God lead us, the power of God hold us, the Joy of God bless us and the Love of God enfold us this Christmas and throughout the coming year.

By the way – patience was really needed for people that night on their journey home as the queue of traffic stretched back to beyond Batford!

I hope God heard my prayer!!



Wishing you all a very Happy Christmas
And may God bless you with all you need in
the year that lies ahead.

With love from

Jane and Roger

Secretary's Notes

How many of you recognise this young man?



This young man, Stormzy, the grime and hip hop music king from London's urban music scene, has written and recorded the song *Blinded by Your Grace*. I only came across it thanks to my Grandchildren but I have felt deeply moved by the sentiments in his lyrics and grateful that this young man is willing to share his faith in his music. His commitment to God and his profession of faith is being shared with an audience our generation find hard to reach. If you read his lyrics perhaps you will understand why I felt compelled to share them with you all. A young black youth brought up in London where he experienced poverty, violence and a gang culture believes and trusts in God and wants to express this in his music.

Lord, I've been broken
Although I'm not worthy

You fixed me

I'm blinded by your grace.

You saved this kid and I'm not your first

It's not by blood and it's not by birth.

I'm blinded by your grace

Every night, every day

And I was lost, yeah

Through the darkness you came

And I'll be alright

With you by my side

The way that I see you

You're all that I'm needing

Your love never let's me down

Your love never leaves me, how?

And when I'm losing faith and there is nowhere left to turn

I pray you won't let me down

I pray you won't let me down

I'm blinded by your grace

Every night, every day

And I was lost, yeah

But ever since you found me

I'm blinded by your grace

Through the darkness you came

And I'll be alright

With you by my side

I can't escape you

I can't replace you

So don't walk away from me now

I would normally focus my December notes on the wonder of Christmas and the true meaning of Christmas but having listened to these words written and recorded by this young man I didn't want to miss the opportunity of sharing them with you all.

I hope and pray the generation who follow him will listen to his message and hopefully find faith for themselves.

Looking Forward

December promises to be a busy month with lots of activities, worship opportunities and gatherings enabling us all to share in the wonder of the infant birth and celebrate together. Needless to say I will be looking for your help with various tasks to ensure all is in place.

Reminders

Sunday 3rd December

First Sunday in Advent and also Gift Sunday

NB I need volunteers to decorate the tree in preparation for the Gift Service.

We will be collecting gifts for CAP, YMCA, Cellar, and the Woman's Refuge. A list of requested items is available in Church

and also in this magazine. Gifts should not be wrapped but wrapping paper and gift cards would be appreciated.

Friday 8th December Preparing Church for Carols by Candlelight

Please come along and lend a hand from 10am onwards. There is lots to do and floristry skills are not essential for many of the tasks. If you can bring long lasting foliage this will be greatly appreciated.

Sunday 10th December Carols by Candle Light

Coffee , Mulled Wine and mince pies in the lower hall from 3.30pm.

We need mince pies and volunteers to help serve and clear away.

NB No morning Worship

Sunday 17th December

Morning Worship 10.30am

Christmas Special for young families 4-5.15pm

Thursday 21st December Longest Night 6-9pm

Sunday 24th December

10.30am Morning Worship

11.30pm Candlelight Communion

Monday 25th December

Coffee and Mince Pies from 9.30am followed by 10.30am Family Worship

Sunday 31st December

10.30am Morning Worship

Wednesday 3rd January 10am

Helpers to pack away Christmas.

I hope I haven't missed anything so may I take this opportunity to wish you all a very Happy Christmas and good wishes for the New Year. Thank you one and all for your support in 2017

May God bless you all over the festive season.

In my prayers

Joyce

I thought you might like to know a little about my sabbatical. Sabbatical is a wonderful gift of time for a minister to be free of pastoral expectations for the time away and I valued not having a full diary, being able to pursue things I used to delight in and time to read and reflect and listen to God.

I told you what my intentions were to look at spiritual formation and discipleship; what is it that opens our hearts to God and be whole life disciples. I did have opportunity to read and retreat but it was the simple things like responding to scripture in creative ways, drawing or writing, having time to pray while I was out walking, meeting strangers and having time to listen to their stories that also blessed.

The 10 day silent retreat was a totally different experience. I found I quite soon settled into the routine of reading reflecting and prayer, walking and creating then sharing what had been going on for me with my accompanier. Even today, it was such a profound experience I find it hard to articulate except to know what a gift it was to take that time to be alone with God and be helped to go much deeper into God and listen more acutely than I ever had before.

I was glad of the time we spent in Llanelli walking the dogs on the beach and reading. It took a while for me to get back to talking but once I did – well just ask Roger!!!

Visiting the young offenders institution in Weatherby also had a profound effect on me. It is a category C prison which means some of the 'trainees' there, as they are referred to, will be facing life sentences. I was privileged to shadow Andrew, one of the chaplains for the day and able to see how chaplaincy works.

In the morning I was invited to help with a Christianity Explored group where 7 lads came to learn more about their faith. Several of them spoke about their families and home life, which were mostly quite deprived and difficult; they talked about their faith and for three of them their very real encounters with God. One young man wanting to have a sense of belonging felt drawn to the camaraderie of the Muslim inmates. He told everyone he was going to convert and eventually shared this with his mother- the family 3rd generation Christians fled Pakistan in fear of their lives – and she helped him to see that what he believed about Jesus was

just not compatible with Islam. Andrew had tried to get to see him over the next few days and there was always a reason why he couldn't – the wing was on lock down or the lad was at an appointment, so he prayed that Jesus would reveal himself to him.

When Andrew did get to see him he knew immediately something had happened, the lad's face was completely different and he was bursting to tell him about a dream he had. In his dream Andrew came to him with the Bible and showed him passage after passage – which unusually for dreams he remembered reading, and each of these passages convinced him that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and that he died for him. When he had finished telling the story Andrew asked him if he thought he should tell those who he had previously told he was going to convert to Islam that he had changed his mind. Later in the day Andrew heard that he had been telling everyone what had happened to him and how he was a Christian for sure. This young guy still needs our prayers. It is a difficult environment to live out what you believe.

While I was there I visited In to Out, the award winning charity started by Andrew to help the young men who are released return to normality with support. It is run on a very slim budget but the work they do is quite amazing. They have a network of befrienders across the north of England who will come alongside those who are released, help them with their benefit claims, help them get what they need for the accommodation they are given and help them through the minefield of applying for jobs and finding things to occupy them until they are in work. Only 14% of those who don't work with the charity don't reoffend within the first year following their release. Working with In to Out this figure goes up to 64%. Their work is really inspiring.

The final visit I made in the 6 weeks before Dad was taken ill was to Launde Abbey where I went to visit their Warden, Chris Webb to talk with him about his book *Fire of the Word*, which is full of ideas to help read scripture in a deeper more meaningful way and bring us closer to God.

I had only been back a few days when Dad fell ill. It quickly became obvious that the mild infection was more than had first been envisaged. He died very peacefully in hospital surrounded by his family 5 days later.

Thank you so much for the flowers and all your cards and prayers during what was a very difficult time, especially for Mum. After 71 years of marriage it cannot be easy to lose your partner. Hopefully a new chapter in her life is about to begin as she moves into Anson Court in Panshanger at the beginning of December.

In my time away I found a slower rhythm that led to more creativity and time for God. If that can be a lasting legacy I need to find a way to bring it into everyday life. That is still a work in progress!

Jane

Each time we go to Harpenden the way seems more familiar, the faces become more familiar, and we can see that in practice we are becoming friends as the Cluster draws ever closer together. This Sunday I guessed that 30 people from WGCURC made the journey and we joined another 40 from Harpenden and Wheathampstead.

The Service for the Induction of the Revd Jane Weedon into the Heartland Group and Mid Herts Cluster was conducted by the Revd Dr Andrew Prasad, the Moderator of the North Thames Synod, who we have met many times before. The Call to Worship included the words 'The God given gifts to us are to be used to continue God's creative work' followed by the response 'In worship we come to give thanks and to share in his task'. So there we were creating the Mid Herts Cluster and joyfully joining together in the task.

The service included five hymns interspersed with prayers and reflection times. The reading from John Chapter four was a joint dramatised presentation of Jesus meeting the lady from Samaria at the well, when she was amazed to find Jesus, a Jew, talking with her, and asking her to draw him a drink of water from the well. Little did she know that the water was to be living water giving her forgiveness and understanding. A man from Harpenden took the part of a disciple and a lady from Wheathampstead the Samaritan lady while our Matthew took the role of Jesus.



The Moderator then asked first Jane and then the congregation to confess and ask her and us to agree to her serving in the churches of the Mid Herts Cluster followed by an Induction Prayer and the Right Hand of Fellowship.

The Prayers of Concern included the words ' Loving God, As we come to meet you at the well, Give us the courage

to drink deeply of the living water you offer us, and bring us into a deeper relationship with you'.

After the blessing and the Messy Grace (led by Jane of course), we gradually moved into the Harpenden URC church hall to enjoy an impressive spread of food and drinks.

On the morning of Saturday 11 November our Elders and the Elders in Harpenden and Wheathampstead will be at Harpenden again for a joint meeting of the Elders of the Cluster.

Graham Daniels