

| Services February 2022 | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| 6 th February Epiphany 5 70 th Anniversary Accession HM Queen | | 9.30 Cuxton Holy Communion 11.00 Halling Holy Communion Visiting preacher from the Church Army. | Isaiah 6 vv 1-8 p690 Luke 5 vv 1-11 p1032 |
| 13 th February Septuagesima | | 9.30 Cuxton Holy Communion 11.00 Halling Holy Communion | Jeremiah 17 vv 5-10 p776 I Corinthians 15 vv 12-20 p1155 Luke 6 vv 17-26 p1034 |
| 20 th February Sexagesima | | 9.30 Cuxton Holy Communion 11.00 Halling Holy Communion | Genesis 2 vv 4-25 p4 Revelation 4 vv 1-11 p1236 Luke 8 vv 22-25 p1037 |
| 27 th February Quinquagesima | | 9.30 Cuxton Holy Communion 11.00 Halling Holy Communion | Exodus 34 vv 29-35 p94 II Corinthians 3 v12 – 4 v2 p1160 Luke 9 vv 28-36 p1040 |
| 2 nd March Ash Wednesday | | 9.30 Cuxton Holy Communion 11.00 Halling Holy Communion | Joel 2 vv 12-17 p912 Matthew 6 vv 16-21 p970 |
| Holy Communion Cuxton Wednesdays 9.30 | | Holy Communion Halling Thursdays 9.30 | |
| 2 nd February Candlemas | Malachi 3 vv 1-5 Luke 2 v 22-40 | 3 rd February | Ezekiel 36 vv 16-36 Matthew 27 vv 27-44 |
| 9 th February | Proverbs 2 vv 1-9 Matthew 12 vv 38-42 | II Samuel 12 vv 1-10 | Matthew 13 vv 24-30 |
| 16 th February | Jeremiah 2 vv 14-32 John 1 vv 35-51 | 17 th February | Jeremiah 3 vv 6-18 John 2 vv 1-12 |
| 23 rd February | Jeremiah 6 vv 9-21 John 4 vv 1-26 | 24 th February St Matthias | Acts 1 vv 15-26 Matthew 11 vv 25-30 |

A rather belated Happy New Year everyone! Thank you for all your support and everything that you have done during the pandemic. We've done our best to maintain services and will continue to do so, God willing. Our plans are, of course, subject to change at short notice. These are the services we hope to hold in February. Watch out for any notices of social events or whatever that we might be able to put on. My intention is to continue with both paper and online versions of the magazine throughout the year. Paper copies will be 30p each or £3.00 for the year. Please let me have any material you might have for inclusion by 8.30am on the second Friday of the month before publication – ie Friday 11th February for the March magazine. Tommy and I do our best, but I am sure our readers would like to see contributions from a wider range of contributors. Local news, local history, details of organisations, events planned, events past and enjoyed, jokes, nature, recipes are all popular items when we have them. Lots of things are of interest to readers, including strongly held views and opinions. I'm not into cancel culture, but obviously anything you say needs to be within the law and the bounds of courtesy. We must always speak the truth, but do so in love.

My parish web page provides information – sometimes more up to date than printed paper magazines & notices. There are also sermons and bible notes (under Teaching) and histories of our two churches. If you give me your email address, I can include you in more frequent newsletters, briefings and updatings. Please let me know if I can help you in any way – including prayer requests. Please keep in touch even if you are having to isolate. Don't forget, even if you cannot come to Church at this time, many of our services are on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCt19Ky3DY43cyO_AJ8e-6_w. There are also plenty of resources on the Church of England web page. I can also bring you Holy Communion at home if you ask me.

<http://www.cuxtonandhalling.org>

Questions

- Did you hear about the medium who tried to contact his deceased window cleaner using a squeegee board?
 What runs round a field without moving? A fence.
 What points in one direction and is headed in the opposite direction? A pin.
 How do we know that birthdays are good for us? The more we have, the longer we live.
 Why didn't you give me a Christmas present this year? You said you'd like a surprise.
 What followed the dinosaurs? Their tails.
 Have you ever read *It's a Dog's Life?* It's by Norah Bone.



Shaking the Kaleidoscope

What follows is a brief personal account of my experience and memories of pastoral reorganisations in the Medway Towns. To be fair, I don't know all the facts and I am not privy to

the reasoning that went on behind the scenes. Nevertheless, these are cautionary tales about what can happen when powerful people make decisions that affect other people's lives, they themselves having little accountability. We can see for ourselves the effects of their decisions even if don't know why they made them or – on what logic or on what evidence.

You probably know St Mary's Church Chatham, even if you don't know that it is called that. It is one of the most prominent buildings in the Medway Towns and is situated on Dock Road on the left as you leave Chatham heading towards Gillingham. It can be seen from miles around and, when the bells were in ringable condition, you could hear them from the top of Chatham Hill to Strood and Frindsbury and even, when it was otherwise very quiet, Cuxton. They were far more impressive than the bells of Rochester Cathedral. St Mary's was the original Chatham Parish Church and there had been a church on that site since Saxon times.

By the 1930s, the congregation had dwindled considerably. However, a very able rector was appointed and, during the war, the Church had a very effective ministry not only to local people but also to the vast numbers of service personnel stationed at Chatham. Services were held, I was told, in Chatham public houses. It is certainly true that congregations were so large that two evening services had to be held in order to accommodate all those who wished to attend.

After the war, numbers diminished as one would expect, but it was clear that there was potential there, given the right people, clerical and lay. To be fair, there were several churches in central Chatham serving what had been a large residential population. There were houses where the Pentagon now stands, but, as was the fashion after the war, the local authority pursued a policy of decanting town centre populations out into the suburbs (whether they wanted to go or not) and zoning – keeping separate residential, commercial

and industrial developments. The wisdom of these policies is now being challenged. Without local residents to support them, town centres tend to die off and local businesses go into decline. People depend too much on transport to get to work and leisure venues. With poor public transport and expensive town centre parking, profitable trade leaves town for large out of town retail parks with acres of free parking. Local authorities, like Church of England dioceses, have a great deal of power and too little accountability. When they are sure they know best, they see no reason to listen to the wisdom of local people – the people most affected by their policies.

Anyway, the feeling was that there were too many churches in Chatham Town Centre. St Mary's parish had been merged with St John's in Railway Street. St John's parish formerly included what would become the housing developments of Luton, Walderslade, etc. but these had acquired their own church buildings and eventually became independent parishes. St Mary's was closed in 1974 and St John's became the sole Church of England Church in Chatham Town Centre. It wasn't that there was no life left in St Mary's. For some time a "St Mary's congregation in exile" met in somebody's house, but I don't know how viable it might have been.

The closure of St Mary's left a problem which still hasn't really been solved. What do you do with a building which is too important to demolish and expensive to maintain when you aren't prepared to use it for the purpose for which it was originally built? The same issue arises when many other churches are declared redundant.

A very great deal of money was spent on St John's to repair the fabric, restore the organ and to adapt it to serve some of the desperate social needs in Chatham. A dedicated congregation was able to do all this and maintain sound finances in one of the poorest parts of the diocese.

But the council decided to have another go at remodelling the town centre and St John's found itself effectively marooned by that extraordinary flyover which the local authority insisted on building. Some people suggested that St Mary's rather than St John's should have been kept open. Whether or not that would have been a viable proposition, it was now far too late for that. For

this and other reasons, it was decided to merge St John's with Chatham United Reformed Church in Clover Street. The URC is a merger between the English Presbyterian Church and the Congregational Church of England and Wales. The old Chatham Presbyterian Church building is now the King's Church. The Victorian building in Clover Street was Chatham Congregational Church and replaced an earlier building which went right back to the separation of the Congregational Church from the Church of England in the seventeenth century. The combined fellowship came to be known as the Emmaus Church. St John's Church building in Railway Street was closed and the worshipping community made its home in the Clover Street building. It was good to come together after more than three centuries apart.

However, things haven't worked out. I don't know the details. Rumour had it that the URC bureaucracy bore some share of the blame, but other local factors were probably even more important. It wouldn't surprise me if red tape were a significant part of the problem. My grandmother was a member of Southfleet Congregational Church when it became part of the URC. The bureaucracy came as a very nasty shock to the worshippers and I cannot help but wonder if this over-centralised bureaucracy is part of the reason for the rapid decline of the URC so that it is now smaller than either of its component parts was at the time of the merger. The Church of England should take note. Tying up decent, hard-working faithful church members in red tape does nothing for church growth. Christians are the light of the world, the salt of the earth. We (clergy and lay people) should be out in the world doing God's work, not sitting in church meetings or completing endless paperwork.

Anyway, the upshot is that it has now been decided to reopen St John's. There are many opportunities to serve the local community, which local Christians are eager to take up. Sadly, however, there is the tremendous cost of repairing the damage caused by twenty years of neglect.

Deaneries have been told to draw up mission plans. Gillingham was one of the first to do so. One of the suggestions was fairly uncontroversial – that where people go into care homes or

hospitals in a different parish from the one they formerly lived in, the clergy of the parish they are now living in could visit them in place of their own vicars. The only difficulty is that we tend to make friends with our parishioners and still want to visit them even if they are in homes in other parishes.

Holy Trinity Twydall was built in the 1960s. It is a large church, built in an architectural style supposedly reminiscent of a Kentish oast house. Like many 1960s buildings, it has not worn well and the suggestion was that it could be pulled down and replaced with a more suitable structure and some of the land it occupies could be used for affordable housing. Holy Trinity being the most interesting and iconic building on the Twydall estate, Medway Council had it listed and thereby put the kybosh on the best suggestion in the Gillingham mission plan.

For years, diocesan staff have been saying that there are too many churches in Gillingham. There aren't too many churches in Gillingham. The problem is that Gillingham residents don't go to them. Instead of trying to solve the problem by inspiring the people of Gillingham with the Christian vision, the solution espoused by the ecclesiastical authorities has been to close one of the Gillingham churches. For three decades or more, the axe hung over St Luke's Gillingham near the Strand. However, an effective ministry there built up the congregation and, when it came to it, it was decided that it was St Barnabas near the bus garage which should close. On this occasion, a lively campaign by local people has saved their parish church – at least for now.

I suppose I was in my late teens (so 50 or so years ago) when the three Strood churches were combined with Frindsbury to become a single team ministry. In those days, the idea of team ministry was not supposed to be to reduce the number of clergy but to take on a number of clergy with different gifts (such as for youth work or spiritual development or care of the elderly) which would be available to all the churches within the team. I don't know what went wrong. I've always thought that it was the untimely death of the man who was the inspiration behind the project which brought it to an end. Whatever the reason, it all went so wrong that *team* is still a four

letter word in some circles in Strood. All Saints Frindsbury and St Francis Strood regained their independence, but St Nicholas and St Mary's remained one parish. Now, the old St Mary's parish was at that time more populous than all the parishes on the peninsula combined together. It encompassed one of the poorest parts of the Medway Towns. From the 1970s onwards there was a large immigrant population. So, ironically perhaps, it was just the sort of area in which the current Archbishop of York thinks we should be looking to establish churches – urban, diverse and a place where social deprivation was far from uncommon. Given the Church of England's current 2021 strategy, rural churches on the peninsula should have been closed and resources diverted to central Strood. This would have turned out to have been a mistake as there have been large housing developments at Hoo and many more are planned. Nevertheless, there is a great need for Christian presence in the old St Mary's parish. Some liberal clergymen thought it unlikely that immigrants of Asian descent would be likely to become Christians and that they therefore would not need a Church. To me, this is racist, patronising and contrary both to our Lord's command to preach the Gospel to every nation and to St Paul's words about our all being one in Christ irrespective of race, sex or status.

Understandably and inevitably, the resources of the combined parish were concentrated on the much more viable St Nicholas and St Mary's closed. A black led Church took on the building,

however, very successfully. Praise the Lord for what He has done through their faithfulness. But why couldn't the Church of England have made a go of things at St Mary's? Too little faith maybe? I don't blame the people at St Nicholas. They have an important task in their own part of the parish. I do question the wisdom of the bishops and the diocese, however, in taking away St Mary's independent status as a parish with its own vicar. A distinct community requires a distinct Church.

I don't know whether this is something for which the Church is responsible or the Local Education Authority, but it grieves me that St Mary's Church of England School which was attended by both my grandmother and (more briefly) by my mother, which encouraged children in their commitment to the Christian faith, has now been replaced by "St Mary's All Faiths School", which I believe has no connection to the Christian Church.

In conclusion, I should say that the evidence is that pastoral reorganisation is too often carried out without consulting local people and in ignorance of potential change in the areas which parish churches endeavour to serve. We should be very wary of dismantling centuries old structures which have benefitted their communities down through the ages and the Church of England will be foolish if it entrusts bishops and diocesan offices with more powers to make drastic changes without proper accountability both to the local Church and to the wider community.

Thanks for Christmas

We weren't able to do everything that we normally do and I'm sorry that some people missed out once again on the things which they like best about Christmas in Church. We did, however, achieve most of what we wanted to do and I would like to thank all the people who worked so hard to make things happen so wonderfully well in these difficult times. Both our churches, as always, are kept clean and well-maintained by volunteers throughout the year. Extra help would always be welcome. The flowers were beautifully arranged as always. Both churches had lovely Christmas trees and there was the whole Christmas Tree Festival at Halling with trees provided and decorated by organisations and people in the villages. They were beautifully themed. Thanks too to those who organised and co-ordinated the whole Christmas Tree Festival, putting so much effort into that as well as into so much else in the Church. We thank our organists and choristers for their contribution to the music and the ringers for ringing at as many services as possible. Practice nights are also appreciated in the village. I should also like to thank those who organised and put on the nativity plays – children and adults, those who had rehearsed and those who were drafted in at the last minute. We combined our nativity play at Cuxton with our Holy Communion on 19th at St Michael's. We had a separate carol service and impromptu nativity at Halling. At both these services, we distributed a limited number of Christingles, celebrating Jesus the Light of the world and our calling to share His Light in the world. Then there was the classic Service of Nine Lessons and Carols at Cuxton – an opportunity to

hear the story of God's unfolding love for us in Christ told in the context of sublime music. This was followed by mulled wine and mince pies in the church hall. Thank you to those who supplied the necessities and waited on us in order to preserve the requisite social distancing. Christmas Day we celebrated the Christ Mass in both villages and enjoyed some fellowship with our Bulgarian friends at the end of the service at Cuxton.

Our services were comfortably well attended as I had hoped, but not packed like I feared. Let's hope that next year we are back to normal – even better than we were before the pandemic. Thanks to everyone who supported us with your presence. Thank you all for your prayers.

We were also pleased to host at St John's two productions of the Halling School Christmas Carol Concert.

Roger.

Parish Christmas Cards

More thanks are also due to those who delivered Christmas cards from us and Cuxton URC to nearly every house in the parish. It is hard work!

I'm very much in favour (once again after a lapse in enthusiasm) of these epistles general from the Churches to every house in the villages. The Church is here for the whole community, not just for those who attend its public worship. We're here for non-believers and those of other faiths as well as for Christians, and everyone who lives in the parish is entitled to ask for our services. We pray for the whole community and we do what we can to meet people's needs and to work with others to make Cuxton and Halling even better places to live in, to work in and to visit than they are already. Don't hesitate to ask.

I'm not saying that we wouldn't like to see every one of you join us in the Christian faith. If you are a Christian, you believe that no human life is fulfilled without the knowledge of God. To know God is to have eternal life. Jesus came that we might have life in all its fulness. And that is what Christmas is really all about. I don't apologise for saying, however, that joining in the life of a local Church is a key aspect of being a Christian. We support one another in our Christian life and in becoming better, more resilient people. We are to that extent diminished if U R missing from this Ch—ch. So we would love you to join us in our worship and in our other activities.

Our Christmas cards are a Christmas greeting to you all. They bear a message. They advertise our services.

Years ago, the Anglican parish distributed a free copy annually of the December magazine to every home. This, perhaps, was better still, but it eventually collapsed under its own weight. Back in the 1980s, the Church was the only organisation issuing a parish newsletter or magazine. Believe it or not, there was no internet. So everybody wanted to get everything they had for the villages into that December magazine. The last year we tried to do this our printing machine broke down under the strain and despite assistance from Cuxton School and St Francis Parish Church, there were still pages which needed to be printed professionally and expensively. Then there was the sheer bulk of magazines to carry round the streets.

So we decided to send a Christmas card to the whole parish and just send the December magazine to regular subscribers. As I remember, the URC went for quality, purchasing theirs from a professional supplier of Christian materials, and we went for quantity, running thousands of paper cards off on our Gestetner.

The cards were bundled up into streets and left out in church for members of the congregation to take and deliver. I quite enjoyed doing my share. I do feel a bit sorry for the postmen and paper boys who have to deliver to some roads in this parish every day, but I didn't mind doing it once or twice a year. I was young then! I could charge up and down all those steps and leap like a gazelle over garden walls. It didn't take me long to do dozens of addresses. I had a naive belief that, if dogs were allowed to roam free in front gardens or even in the road outside, their owners must know that they wouldn't bite anyone.

It was an opportunity to go to parts of the parish one doesn't often have occasion to visit, to see people's gardens, fish ponds and Christmas decorations, as well as to meet people one doesn't often see. I do very much like living in Cuxton Rectory with its large, secluded garden and the fact that it is surrounded by trees and butts on to the churchyard and woods, but this pleasant situation does mean that I don't see people casually, either neighbours or passers by, as I did in my last parish, when people would stop and talk to me when they saw me out in the garden, which I mostly am in the Summer. It has crossed my mind that doing a job like delivering cards or magazines I am doing something useful which is well within my capabilities unlike, say, attending meetings. Still, we sometimes can't get out of doing things which we would rather not do and are not particularly good at.

Anyway, there came a time when I lost my enthusiasm for delivering cards. The number of people able and willing to help with this task was diminishing and I found myself expected to deliver to more and more of the parish – naturally enough those roads with the most steps and the longest gardens and in the most out of the way places. I was getting older and more feeble. No more jumping over walls – of which there seemed to be more as people understandably wanted to protect their privacy and discourage people doing deliveries from trampling on their plants or wearing paths in their grass. Trying to push paper cards through letter boxes with formidable draught excluders resulted in bleeding knuckles and one then had to take care not to get blood on the cards. I'm not sure how postmen manage to get letters through some draught excluders. Max made my postman's task easier by breaking off the inner flap in his eagerness to be first to get at the letters. Looking back, it seems that there were several years when early December was particularly cold and slippery. I remember one occasion when I slid over on an icy slope and it was not at all clear how I was going to get up again given the feebleness of my knees. Obviously I did. I think I had to crawl to a more level area. Moreover, the days are short in December and it gets dark early. I also began to wonder whether these deliveries were appreciated by the people to whom we made them. [I try not to let the postman see me put the junk mail straight into the recycling in case I hurt his feelings.]

It was the Fresh Expressions group which gave these epistles general a new lease of life. Members of the Anglican and United Reformed congregations get together in Fresh Expressions to find new ways of expressing the faith. We decided that St Michael's and St John's and Cuxton URC would have a joint Christmas card. We would pay for professionally printed cards and share the costs and the task of delivering them, which is what we have done for the last few years and I hope that they are appreciated. There is still only a small number of people sharing in delivering them and each of these has had to deliver a large number of cards and still we haven't quite covered the whole parish. Please accept my apologies if you were missed out. I am thankful also that, for some reason (partly I think psychosomatic and partly as a result of cycling) my knees are less feeble than they were a few years ago. So I can do my bit a bit better.

This year, it fell to me to do St Andrew's Park and Halling Riverside. I did enjoy doing those roads. There are very few steps. Most gardens are not too long and some are not even divided from their neighbours by walls or fences. I didn't meet too many people. Most houses these days are empty in the day time with adults out at work and children at school. There were some people about, however, some very friendly and chatty. There are still some pretty tough draught excluders. There were lots of interesting Christmas decorations, including one that sang to me. I noticed how many people had parcels awaiting them on their doorsteps or instructions to drivers to tell them what to do with parcels when they are out. I read in the newspapers that there has been a lot of trouble with parcels suffering damage or getting lost. I thought it was just me because the Rectory is so hard to find, but evidently not. Anyway, I have a nice new sign on the gate. It's only taken 34 years to replace the old sign which disappeared when the broken down old gate was replaced with the present triptych.

Some people, understandably, had notices saying "No Junk Mail". I wondered if there were people who might say that free Christmas cards were junk mail. Then I thought that, if they described the Christian message as junk, they could probably be "done" for hate speech – not that I would ever go along with the increasingly silly limitations on free speech which some elements of our society seem bent on imposing on

us. *I may not agree with what you say, but I'll fight for your right to say it*, as Voltaire is alleged to have said, presumably in French. Some front doors had signs saying "No Religious Bodies". I decided that that didn't apply to me because I am a religious soul!

One thing did worry me, however, the number of people who have artificial grass. I suppose that some owners of plastic lawns might be people who really can't push a mower, but I expect that many of them are not. Indeed, it is very likely that some people with plastic grass frequently drive in their cars to the gym where they pay to perform exercises which achieve nothing except the improvement of their own physical fitness. Fitness for what is the question. Plastic is a real problem for the environment. It's made of hydrocarbons. It takes forever to biodegrade. Most artificial lawns are impervious to water and therefore increase the risk of flooding. Real grass absorbs carbon dioxide and releases oxygen into the atmosphere. It is also home to many invertebrates, food for birds and small animals, and (if you are not too fussy about a pristine lawn) tiny flowering plants and fungi as well, also food for other creatures. A good lawn will improve soil structure. Plastic grass just destroys it. From what I hear, plastic isn't even that much of a labour saver. It needs to be cleaned. If you need exercise, mowing, especially with an old-fashioned push mower is ideal. When you think about it, it exercises nearly every muscle from your shoulders right down to your feet. In fact ordinary tasks such as gardening and housework are very good exercise as well as achieving something worthwhile. It doesn't really make sense to neglect these and either become unfit and overweight or have to take exercise in order to burn off the calories you don't use up mowing the lawn or vacuuming the carpet. In a book published in 1959 which I have just read, one of the characters boasts that he never does anything more strenuous all day than winding his watch. We don't even do that any more! It's as if we were determined to find ever more ways in which to use up precious resources and degrade our environment.

Apart from that, I did enjoy delivering those cards and they did some good. At least one person who came to our Christmas services did so because she had received a card.

RIK.

From the Registers

Baptisms:

21st November
28th November
28th November

Lila Diane Murray
Katie Louise Ayles
Theodore John Burman

Brockley
Larkfield
Larkfield

Wedding:

28th December

David Paul Roman & Rachelle Louise Boxell

Cuxton

Funerals:

7th December
23rd December

Nelson Ridley
John Draper

The Caravan Site
The Caravan Site

Betty Topham RIP

Some of you will remember Brian and Betty Topham who were active members of our congregation until they moved to Yatton for Brian's work. We were sorry to hear that Brian died just before Christmas last year (2020) and I have just heard that Betty died soon afterwards. Our thoughts and prayers are with their sons Simon and Bruce at this time.

Brian worked for the Inland Revenue and took special note when the Gospel reading was the Call of Matthew (Matthew 9⁹⁻¹³) when preachers do tend to go on a bit about how unpopular tax gatherers were in olden times. Well Matthew became an apostle and Brian & Betty were themselves faithful servants of the Church.

Percy Pigeon's Perceptions

Good day to you all - and somewhat belatedly, a Happy New Year! We thank you for the remains of mince pies, sandwiches, stuffing balls, Stollen, panettone and bread sauce so kindly left for us, for the foxes and the badgers, in your flimsy bags. We watched one brave fox tear open a bag in May Street and rush off with a collection of bones leaving us many tasty morsels, complaining as he rushed past that it was wretched turkey again.

However, I must move on by expressing our pigeon disappointment with those shiny new roof panels we see on houses in Halling, Cuxton and Snodland. Are they to keep us pigeons off your roof tiles? Or do they have another purpose? We find it extremely difficult to perch on them and when the sun shines on them we are dazzled and confused. They play havoc with our homing procedures. Poor Cuthbert was so very befuddled, he flew off and next thing he knew, whoosh! he was in Snodland High Street, just outside the bakery. He has vowed to steer clear of roofs and perch on trees and aerials only.

This month has not been a busy one, just ensuring nests are dry, warm and cosy for winter and scoping out all potential sources of food. My wife and I have left the top of the crazy ash tree in the rectory garden until the leaves have begun to return.

As I'm sure you know, we pigeons mate for life. My mate is Philippa. We have moved nest several times. Our very best nest was in a discarded toolbox in an empty garage in Halling. It was a shame to leave it when workmen arrived. Since then we have lived on a wide ledge at Whittings Farm. We are now over-wintering in an Amazon box in a disused lock-up. Unlike many cousins we do not fly south for the winter. Your festive time is not so good for us - fewer crumbs in streets and no insects or worms in green spaces. We tend to hunker down and keep warm until the sun shines again. We often get confused about the festivities: your shops shout about it in September so it must take you a long time to prepare. Philippa and I really love the festive music which comes from the churches. These are carols. We bob and coo along to them. Rumours are rife that snow will come early this year so we must ensure we have a warm secure nest and a good source of food. If you put sherry and carrots out for Santa and his reindeer, spare a slice of bread on your roof for us. In the meanwhile, Stay dry and warm and above all, stay safe. Coo coo

Church Hall Draw January: 1st prize - David Maxwell, 2nd prize - Denise Graves, 3rd prize - Malcolm Curnow



You will be pleased to know that we collected £130.65 for the Children's Society at our Christingles this year. Like other churches, we would probably have collected more if we had been able to have our normal services – which hopefully we will next year. If you would like to have a collection tin at home for the

Children's Society, please contact Julia Wells 724424. To find out more, see

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk>

Just Juries

There has been quite a bit of controversy about the acquittal by a jury of the four men responsible for toppling the statue of the Bristol slaver Edward Colston and throwing it into the harbour. It was discussed in, among other fora, Radio 4's *The Moral Maze* on 12th January. There is no disputing that they did it. Not only did they admit it, they boasted about it. Neither is there any dispute that the jury had the legal right to acquit them. In a jury trial, the jury is solely responsible for the determination of guilt or innocence, irrespective of what the judge, counsel, police, the government, the press or the general public may think. This is a principle which has been enshrined in English Law for centuries. A jury may return what the authorities consider to be a perverse verdict and that verdict will stand whatever anybody else might think. The controversy whirls around whether these jurors were right to acquit in this case and whether perhaps this power to return perverse verdicts should be removed or at least modified in some way.

Those who support the jury would say that the people who toppled the statue were acting in accordance with their consciences and on behalf of a majority of the people of Bristol. Colston was a generous benefactor to the city, but he was also a very bad man in that he made his money from the hideous cruelty of the slave trade. So did thousands – millions probably – of others. Should we judge people in the past or people in other countries by the standards which we espouse in the twenty-first century West? Yes, *but* is my answer to that. Here is a related but different question.

Should we condemn people for doing what we now know to be wrong but which was perfectly acceptable in the world as it was in their day? Again Yes, *but* is my answer. To clarify my position, certain moral principles are eternal. They exist in the mind of God. They are universally applicable and apply at all times and in all places. So slavery is wrong if you're building the pyramids in Egypt thousands of years BC, growing tobacco in eighteenth century Virginia, or forcing vulnerable refugees to work in a twenty first century British scrap yard. On the other hand, our contemporary western culture isn't necessarily right about everything and the way some people apparently go out of their way to take offence at the very least (or even imaginary) provocation is unequivocally a bad thing.

We have a picture of John Fisher at St John's. He was the last Bishop of Rochester to live at Halling. He is admired by many as a saint, a humanist scholar, who stood up to Henry VIII and, for his pains was confined to the Tower of London where he was treated very badly, before being beheaded for what Henry regarded as treason. On the other hand, he opposed the distribution of the Bible in English and he and William Warham (Archbishop of Canterbury before Thomas Cranmer) had Thomas Hitton burnt at the stake for bringing Protestant literature into the country. They recently put up a statue to Emmeline Pankhurst, campaigner for women's rights but Nazi sympathiser.

Those who deplore the verdict in the Colston case, whatever they think about the removal or retention of the Colston statue, tend to say that the decision should have been taken lawfully and democratically and that excusing law-breaking on the grounds of conscience or popular opinion sets a dangerous precedent. Can just anyone who thinks that the subject of a statue was a bad man or woman simply tear it down? What other laws might we feel justified in breaking on the alleged grounds of conscience or because they are unpopular. Wearing a seat belt when driving offends my beliefs about personal freedom. Should I feel free to disobey the seatbelt law? Should a jury acquit me if I were to come before a crown court charged with persistent refusal to wear a seatbelt?

The answer is not as obvious as it seems. We admire people in history or in other countries today who have disobeyed laws forbidding free speech or freedom of religion. We require soldiers to disobey orders such as to shoot prisoners or to torture suspected enemy agents. In the nineteenth century, laws passed by parliament provided for a child caught stealing a handkerchief to be hanged. Juries sometimes refused to convict children who were obviously guilty of such crimes because the punishment which would be meted out was so obviously unjust.

It is often said that in court we get law not justice. But good laws are just laws. Scientific theories don't accurately describe the world as it is. They are the best approximations to reality which we can manage. As science advances, our approximations get better. We get closer to understanding the way the world works, but we never quite get there. New information and thinking again about what we know already can always refine our comprehension of the universe. Science advances towards the Truth, but we shall never attain to perfect knowledge, only get better as we continue to make the effort. The same with law. There are good laws and bad laws. Some legal systems are better than others. No legal system is perfectly just, but that is what we are aiming for – justice. We refine and improve our laws with a view to making them more just. But no code of laws can be perfect (except God's Law) because all our laws are drawn up and enforced by human beings. No human being is perfect (except Jesus). God's Law is perfect – the Law of love – but we human beings often fail to understand what that principle of love means in our everyday lives and how we ought to apply it. In fact, some people who have been too sure that they understand God's Will have transgressed that very law by attempting to enforce it by extremely unlovely methods, such as the persecution of heretics and unbelievers. Even if we have good laws, the cost of legal action and the difficulty of obtaining legal aid biases the justice system in favour of the rich and powerful.

Most of us would agree that democracy is the least bad form of government. Democracy is far from perfect, however. Hitler was elected. Members of parliament and councillors, civil servants, council officers, etc. are bound to be imperfect. Most of them are doing their best, but they are human beings with all the weaknesses common to humanity. They cannot be all wise. Some of them are lacking integrity. So we have checks and balances. The unelected House of Lords is a counterweight to the elected House of Commons. The monarch is the ultimate backstop. We hold the occasional referendum, introducing popular democracy into the mix. The Supreme Court in the US and the UK has the power to inhibit the elected government from acting unlawfully. But none of these is perfect. We strive to attain a closer approximation between our laws and absolute justice by combining all these different sources of authority, not forgetting the role of individual conscience either. The ability of juries to return *perverse verdicts* is one more safeguard in the mix, one last chance to get it right when the system has it wrong. But juries aren't perfect either. Occasionally they convict the innocent or acquit the patently guilty. No human institution can be perfect. It is only in God that we can trust unreservedly.



Tommy's Talking Points

This is me in the snow. Do you think it will snow this year? I rather hope so. It will be fun to experience something different when we go out on our daily runs. Master is feeling a bit pleased with himself because we managed a morning run every day of 2021. Well he calls it running! He says we might not be able to get out if the weather really turns bad. I don't think he'll give in easily, however. He doesn't seem to mind the cold and the wet and I certainly don't. I think he rather enjoys nature in the raw. And I actually roll in the frost when our grass is rimed on our late evening trips down the garden before bedtime. Master says that Max did the same. He likes best at this time of year crisp bright days like today when the ground is frozen and the sun is shining. It makes him feel bright too and you're quite likely to get Eucharistic Prayer G if it's a day when there is Holy Communion. Days like to today are better than mild, moist days at this time of year, when it's dark later, he slips and slithers around in the mire and we both come home covered in mud.

We haven't been out of the parish for a walk since the one I described in the December magazine. That is not just because of COVID. We don't usually go too far from home when the days are so short and we risk being benighted in unfamiliar places. He did drive into Surrey to meet his friends for a pub lunch at the end of November. He refused even to look at the festive menu because it wasn't yet even Advent. He's stubborn like that. Anyway, although he and his friends were the last to leave the pub, it was a lunchtime dinner and he was back here for tea after only one wrong turning! We did entertain another friend who came to visit us in December and took him for a local walk via Dean and Bush Valleys, across Bush Road and up under the railway to Brockles. It was such a lovely day in late Autumn. From Brockles is one of the finest views in the world. I love going up there and on into Cobham Woods and up to the mausoleum, but we don't go that way very often now, because he prefers to avoid crossing the road when we are running rather than walking. We had lunch in the *White Hart* that day. Master recommends the haddock, from the Winter, but not the festive, menu. He had several other pre-Christmas meals there – with the family, with individuals and with the Mothers' Union, which, I understand, was a great occasion.

I had a compliment paid me this week. I was told that I still look like a puppy and behave like one. I shall be seven on 30th January. That's 49 in human years. I put my health and good looks down to my good nature, my enthusiasm for life and all that exercise in the fresh air and in beautiful countryside. Also my modesty. Master says that COVID has demonstrated how valuable fresh air and public green open spaces are to physical, mental and spiritual health and COP26 etc. have reminded us all how important it is to look after our planet and to protect it from degradation and pollution. He says that there is a number of proposed developments around here that are hardly consistent with looking after the environment or the well-being of the plants, animals and people which inhabit this world. According to Psalm 115¹⁶: *All the whole heavens are the Lord's: the earth has he given to the children of men.* The same psalm points out that idols made of silver and gold are lifeless and so are the people who trust in them. There! You've been told!

We had Lolly to stay for two weeks at Christmas while her family were on holiday. That's why we all had a family weekend earlier in December. The elves even put up the Christmas decorations, though they came down again until it was the proper time to put them up. People said that we dogs wouldn't know it was Christmas. Master said of course we would. There would be chicken for dinner. There wasn't, but Lolly and I knew it was Christmas. You don't usually see that many people in church on a Saturday. Master had beef for his Christmas dinner and that's what we had for tea. He said it was tough, but Lolly and I didn't have any problem with it. We had a couple more meals off it and he made a stew, which he said was nice and tender. It was great having Lolly on our runs and walks. I'm a little bit jealous, but generally it's good having another dog in the house. Master didn't want to let her go home but her family wanted her back and she wanted to go with them.

It's been a quiet New Year. Today I was given a bone and settled down to chew it in the porch while he relaxed over a coffee. He was quite cross when I jumped up because I had seen a fox in the garden and knocked over his coffee. But he very soon forgave me. I'm too cute to be cross with for long! Tommy.