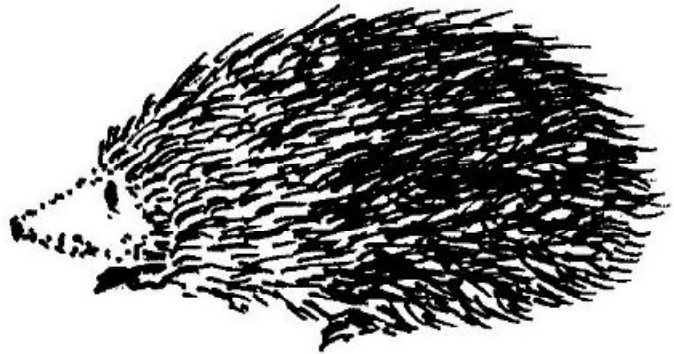


Parish of Cuxton and Halling



February 2024

60p

<http://www.cuxtonandhalling.org.uk>

Services February 2024

Services February 2024			
4 th February Sexagesima		9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Proverbs 8 vv 1-31 p641 Colossians 1 vv 15-20 p1182 John 1 vv 1-14 p1063
11 th February Quinquagesima		9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling	II Kings 2 vv 1-12 p369 II Corinthians 4 vv 3-6 p1160 Mark 9 vv 2-9 p1012
14 th February Ash Wednesday		9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling.	Joel 2 vv 12-17 Matthew 6 vv 16 - 21
18 th February Lent 1		9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Genesis 9 vv 8-17 p10 I Peter 3 v 18-22 p1219 Mark 1 vv 9-15 p1002
25 th February Lent 2		9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Genesis 17 vv 1-16 p16 Romans 4 vv 13-25 p1131 Mark 8 vv 31-38 p1012
3 rd March Lent 3		9.30 Holy Communion & Holy Baptism Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Exodus 20 vv 1-17 p77 I Corinthians 1 vv 18-25 p1144 John 2 vv 13-22 p1065
Holy Communion Cuxton Wednesdays 9.30		Holy Communion Halling Thursdays 9.30	
31 st January	II Samuel 24 vv 1-17 Mark 6 vv 1-6	1 st February	I Kings 2 vv 1-12 Mark 6 vv 7-13
7 th February	I Kings 10 vv 1-10 Mark 7 vv 14-23	8 th February	I Kings 11 vv 4-13 Mark 7 vv 24-30
14 th February Ash Wednesday	Joel 2 vv 12-17 Matthew 6 vv 16 - 21	15 th February	Deuteronomy 30 vv 15-20 Luke 9 vv 22-25
21 st February Ember Day	Jonah 3 vv 1-10 Luke 11 vv 29-32	22 nd February	Esther 14 vv 1-14 Matthew 7 vv 7-12
28 th February	Jeremiah 18 vv 18-20 Matthew 20 vv 17-28	29 th February	Jeremiah 17 vv 5-10 Luke 16 vv 19-31

Copy March Magazine: 9th February 8.30 am Rectory

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roger@cuxtonandhalling.org.uk

Parish Safeguarding Officer: Laura MacDonald, 97, Pilgrims Road, North Halling, 01634 245926

lauraannmacdonald@btinternet.com

Church Hall Hire: cuxtonchurchhall@gmail.com.

St John's Draw (November): £10 each Mrs Burr (11) & Mrs S Mitchell (64)

St John's Draw (December): £5 each Stevie Head (8), Mrs Burr (10), Mrs Smitherman (140)

Church Hall Draw (January): 1st prize Di Maxwell, 2nd Claire Franklin; 3rd Dennis Hills

For Diaries

4th February 12.00 Church Hall - Bring & Share Lunch for British Heart Foundation

24th February, 2024 St Michael's - "Man of Straw"

Sat 16 March 15.00 concert St John's

21st April, 2024 St Michael's - Concert (local talent) - Cancer Research UK

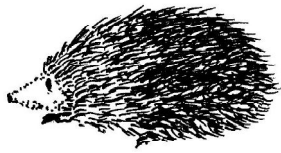
Sat 15 June 15.00 concert St John's

6th July, 2024 St John's Halling - Peninsula Big Band - CRUK

Jokes

Why are there no aspirins in the jungle?
Music seemed to emanate from her golden locks
Which vegetables wouldn't you want on a ship?
What did Mars say to Saturn?
Why do you hear so few steak puns?

Because the parrots eat 'em all
It was her hair band
Leeks
Give me a ring sometime
It's a medium rarely well done



From the Rector
Change, Decay, Entropy,
Life, Eternity

How do you feel about change? Do you love it? Do you embrace it? Do you spend your days

looking around to see how things could be improved? Or do you dislike change, find it a bit threatening, suspect that things can only get worse? People are different. We look at life in different ways. For most of us, some change is welcome, whereas other changes we're not so sure about.

I've been thinking about this article for some time. So I had to ask myself what is my own attitude to change? Those of you who know me will probably say that I am one of those human beings who do not embrace change. I like my life the way it is. When I think about it, I am quite resistant to change, sometimes to the point of irrationality. Of course it makes sense to question the reason for any proposed changes – the advantages and disadvantages of any suggested alteration – but it is foolish to begin with a bias either way. There is the politician's delusion on the one hand ("Something must be done; this is something; so we had better do it.") and the old stick in the mud's blind ignorance on the other (If the King James Bible was good enough for St Paul, it's good enough for me.). When confronted with a new idea, the only sensible way to respond is to consider the evidence and other people's views rationally, prayerfully, and (dare I say it?) humbly.

The Church of England tries to get the balance right in the way we conduct our services. This is from the Preface to the Book of Common Prayer. "It hath been the wisdom of the Church of *England*, ever since the first compiling of her publick Liturgy, to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and of too much easiness in admitting any variation from it. For, as on the one side common experience sheweth, that where a change hath been made of things advisedly established (no evident necessity so requiring) sundry inconveniences have thereupon ensued; and those many times more and greater than the evils, that were intended to be remedied by such change: So on the other side, the particular Forms of Divine worship, and the Rites and Ceremonies appointed to be used therein, being things in their own nature indifferent, and alterable, and so acknowledged; it is but

reasonable, that upon weighty and important considerations, according to the various exigency of times and occasions, such changes and alterations should be made therein, as to those that are in place of Authority should from time to time seem either necessary or expedient." Suffice to say, there are millions of people who think we have always got it wrong, that we're either too ancient or too modern.

Two more observations about me. When I go to the Hempstead Valley Shopping Centre, I don't celebrate the thousands of cars bringing myriads of happy shoppers from all over Kent and the wider world, via the M2, the A2 and the A278, to a retail paradise in which stores, small and great, offer for sale a cornucopia of goods in a variety far exceeding the much humbler offerings of the two shopping parades at Wigmore and the village shops at Hempstead and Bredhurst, which supplied the basic needs of those of us who lived in those communities in days gone by, and indeed (relative to most people's income) at a much lower price. I don't rejoice in the employment opportunities this development has brought (even though I worked there once myself) and the prosperity which has ensued. Neither do I reflect on how wonderful it is that so many individuals and families have been able to make their homes in the very many new buildings.

Curmudgeon that I am, I look back regretfully, nostalgically and wistfully, thinking of those days of yore when there were woods and fields where all those houses and shops are now, of the birds singing their evening chorus in the hedge rows, the carpets of bluebells in the Spring, the very small numbers of cars in the lanes between Hempstead, Lidsing and Bredhurst and when the top of Wigmore Road wasn't made up, a time I can just about remember before the A278 was completed south of Scrubbs Lane and Hoath Way was Hoath Lane, a road so dark that white rings were painted on the roadside trees so that drivers didn't crash into them. I still think about trying to climb up from the Hospital Hill Tunnel through the woods to where a short section of the old Hoath Lane remained for decades in order to see whether it is still there.

Perhaps surprisingly, I have been described as a trendy vicar – both in a good way and a bad way. The good way I'm called a trendy vicar is that I don't all the time speak and act as a vicar might be

conventionally expected to behave. The bad way I'm called a trendy vicar is that I don't all the time speak and act as a vicar might be conventionally expected to behave.

There's a lot to weigh up regarding developments like Hempstead Valley. People obviously need jobs and places to live. We need food and clothing and it is surely not unreasonable to expect some leisure pursuits. On the other hand, major developments deplete habitat for wildlife, generate congestion and pollution, use up the world's resources and contribute to global warming. Are we too materialistic, purchasing what we don't need and adding what we never needed to the growing quantity of waste which defiles our planet?

We sing, "Change and decay in all around I see" and sometimes we (or at least I) are tempted to read the two words – change and decay – as meaning the same thing.

Like I say, many people embrace change and it is a good thing that we do. Improvements in agriculture have resulted in our being better fed. Science and technology, industry and commerce have made our lives safer, more comfortable and better provided for. Advances in medicine have achieved wonders in our lifetimes. (Many of us wouldn't be here today without modern medicine.) I'm certainly grateful for improvements in dentistry over the last couple of hundred years or so.

We talk about progress, but what do we mean by that word? I can think of three meanings. The first assumes that things can only get better. Progress implies improvement. Progress is inevitable. In the backs of their minds, people may be thinking that progress is inevitable because God is running the universe and, as God is good, things can only get better. It's not as simple as that, however. Things do get worse as well as better. God respects our freedom. He entrusts us with this wonderful world. He blesses us with talents and resources, but He leaves us free to decide what we do with them. He is in ultimate charge. Isaiah 2⁴: *And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall*

not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But, for now, we have the choice and only too often we use the resources which could have gone into feeding the world instead to make weapons of war.

The second meaning of progress is that certain changes are inevitable. They may be good or bad, but they are going to happen anyway. "You can't stand in the way of progress." Whether developments like Hempstead Valley are a good thing or a bad thing, they are going to happen anyway and we just have to accept that.

The third way of looking at progress is to recognise that things can change for the better or the worse but that we must be on the right side of history, working with God to resist change for the worse and to work for change for the better.

Some people assume that Science is modern and progressive, ushering in a new future, whereas Religion tends to be backward looking and to resist change.

It's not as simple as that, however. It is true that we *should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.* (Jude 3). God has entrusted us with a great treasure in making Himself known to us in Jesus Christ. This is a treasure which we are bound both to cling onto and to share. Tradition is not, however, simply holding onto the past. Tradition is passing the treasure on from generation to generation.

Christianity is all about change. We turn to Christ. We repent of our sins. We are born again. Romans 12²: *Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.* II Peter 3¹³: *Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.* It's all about renewal, change for the better until we attain to the perfection of eternity.

Science, on the other hand, talks about entropy. The Second Law of Thermodynamics effectively states that some processes are irreversible. The cup which falls off the table and breaks will not jump back up and put itself together again. A hot cup of tea left in a cool room will get cold (and the room will become slightly warmer). Mechanical

clocks run down unless energy is restored to the system by winding them up. (Electric clocks are always being reenergised from the main or a battery.) Ultimately, the universe is running down. Things become less complex. Everything wears out. *Change and decay in all around I see.*

The exception to this is life. Living things grow. They become more complex. They harness the energy in sunlight or in their food apparently to reverse entropy.

Ultimately, of course, even living things are defeated by the Second Law of Thermodynamics. We wear out. We become old and die. In the end, Science can only predict our dissolution.

Faith, however, speaks of eternal life. Living things grow and flourish because they receive energy from outside. So long as they are able to absorb and make use of the energy of the sun, they remain alive. Plants produce flowers and fruit. Animals feed and play and do all the things that living things are meant to do.

Eternal life (the enduring defeat of change and decay) is only possible if we plugged into an inexhaustible source of energy – of which there is only One and can only be One.

God is infinite. The, sun we are told, will reach the end of its life in ten billion years or so and we shan't be around to see it. But God isn't like that. God is for ever – quite literally. His resources are infinite. He supplies all our needs in all eternity.

To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish but naught changeth thee.

It is in our relationship with God and in that relationship alone that we will know the blessings of eternal life.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

Roger.

Christmas 2023

By and large, it was a good Christmas with attendance levels climbing back to where they were before COVID. Thanks to everybody who worked so hard to express our joy at the Lord's Birth and to share the good tidings with the whole parish and the wider world. This includes all those who maintain, clean and care for our church buildings throughout the year; those who work behind the scenes to ensure that services run smoothly; our flower arrangers, musicians, choristers, readers and ringers, all who work extra hard at Christmas; the people who actually make the Christingles and make possible the nativity plays. A lady, now living in another parish, told me how she remembered years ago making Christingles here at Cuxton. There are traditions we observe every year and changes we make as we adapt to changed conditions and new opportunities, all very precious to us.

We welcomed Halling School at St John's for their carol services. There was what has become the traditional Christmas Tree Festival at Halling – trees beautifully decorated by individuals and village organisations on display for the whole week leading up to Christmas.

The Fresh Expressions Group (Cuxton Community Church & the Parish of Cuxton and Halling) delivered Christmas cards to nearly every home in the parish. Well done those who tackled the most difficult roads, especially considering that this is a time of year when it gets dark early and this year it has hardly stopped raining in the run up to Christmas.

FE also joined Cuxton Parish Council and others for the lighting of the Christmas Tree Lights, a Nativity Tableau with a real baby and carol singing. We were so delighted with our accompanist that we were pleased to secure her services for the St John's Carol Service the following Sunday. [Those who attended the Cuxton event missed the Halling Tree Lighting and the pantomime. Oh yes they did!]

It was good to see so many people at the Halling Carol Service, Blessing of the Crib, Christingle and Impromptu Nativity. A major change over the years has been that now adults more than children perform as characters in the Nativity Play. It's all good, though we did have a curious misunderstanding with regard to Mary's costume.

On the same day, Cuxton's Nine Lessons and Carols was as exquisitely wonderful as it always is. The attendance at this service was, however, disappointing. It is always vital to remember that our prayers and praises are directed to God. We are a congregation, not an audience. Worship sincerely offered by those who attend is not invalidated by the absence of those who stay away. It is a joy, however, to share our worship with other people and those who did not attend this year missed a sublime experience. It was a bit disappointing for those who had worked so hard also.

St Michael's was packed the next day for the Scout and Guide Carol service, a wonderful annual event in which the children tell and celebrate the true meaning of Christmas. They took a collection for the Children's Hospice at Keycol, Demelza House. Many of you will know that Demelza House was opened in memory of Demelza Phillips, who grew up in Cuxton and who herself worked in a hospice before dying at the untimely age of 24. The family belonged to our Church and were very much involved in our community. There is a road named after Demelza at Mayflower Heights.

On Christmas Eve, we held our Christingle and nativity play at St Michael's. It is wonderful to see the Church so full and to see people who have been coming over many years – at first as children perhaps, then parents, maybe even grandparents.

Before COVID, attendance at Midnight Mass had dropped off and we did not resume the service when the plague abated. So there was no Midnight Mass in 2022. There was, however, a lot of disappointment expressed. I was pleased that it matters so much to people that we hold these services. With some trepidation lest those who had requested the service didn't come, we celebrated the Midnight Mass at Cuxton in 2023. There was a good number in attendance, including some extra singers in the choir. In my sermon, I talked about which of our Christmas traditions are actually rooted in the Bible. These are the ones in which we can put our trust.

It was on the day before His Death that Jesus told us *Do this in remembrance of Me*. We remember all that He accomplished for us – especially His Death and Resurrection. We know that He is present with us. We anticipate His Second Coming in glory to judge both the quick and the dead. Jesus is the Bread of Life and Holy Communion is essential to our Christmas celebration. The very name Bethlehem means House of Bread. Do you think that is merely a coincidence?

Christmas morning we quietly celebrated in both churches and then continued our celebrations with the three major feasts immediately following. May we continue to proclaim the joy of Christmas as we live out on earth our faith in our Incarnate Lord until that glorious day when we shall see Him face to face and be made like Him.

Roger.



O Little Star of Bethlehem...

Just before sunrise this month (January), a brilliant star can be seen to be shining low in the south-eastern sky. Given the festive season just gone, its appearance reminds us of the wonderful and enduring tale as told to us by the Gospel according to St. Matthew...

Matthew 2: ¹*Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem/*²*saying where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him./...*⁷*Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star had appeared/...*⁹*When*

*they heard the king, they departed; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them till it came and stood over where the young child was.*¹⁰ *When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy...*

The story of the Star of Bethlehem is celebrated both by yuletide church goers and singers of Christmas carols (not to mention the makers of Christmas cards) and is as much a part of an English Christmas as Father Christmas, decorations or roast dinners. It is too good a story not to be true.

That hasn't stopped some noted miserabilists (such as the Reverend David Jenkins) from claiming otherwise, and that the "star" was merely symbolic. They are welcome to their dull, cheerless opinions, of course. I prefer to believe otherwise.

As an amateur astronomer, however, I have often wondered about the heavenly phenomenon that was witnessed by St. Matthew's Magi. What was the nature of the "star" they saw?

The brilliant "star" we can currently see on the south-eastern horizon of our clear, chilly 2024 January mornings is the planet Venus. After the Sun and the Moon, Venus is the brightest object in the sky. If you have sharp eyes and know exactly where to look, it can even be seen during the day (provided it isn't too close to the Sun – do be careful if you go looking for it, especially with binoculars!). Those with really sharp eyes can even see the phases of Venus, which appear just like those of the Moon.

All of this was well known to any self-respecting Wise Man of old, however. Ancient scholars were well aware of the motions of the planets, and so the appearance of Venus in the eastern sky would not have come as a surprise to them, let alone as a portent of great tidings.

Some astronomers (like Colin Humphreys of the University of London) have instead theorised that the Star of Bethlehem was a comet. Modern scholars agree that Our Lord Jesus was probably born sometime around 5BC (and was most likely a spring baby, conceptions in those days often happening when the hard work of the harvest was over!) and ancient Chinese astronomers had recorded that a bright comet was indeed visible at around that time.

However, the Magi would have been mindful of the astrological implications of such cometary manifestations. In ancient times, comets were regarded as celestial harbingers of ill-omen, "blazing forth at the death of princes" as Shakespeare famously noted. It therefore seems unlikely that a comet would have been considered as an appropriate herald of such a joyous occasion as the birth of the Son of God. Comets are also rather fuzzy and not particularly star-like, and would not likely be mistaken for a "star" by anyone considered to be a Wise Man.

Alternatively, it has been suggested that the Star of Bethlehem was a bright nova or supernova, a transient phenomenon associated with the explosive death of a massive star. These events are quite rare and have been recorded by scholars throughout the ages. Alas, there are no contemporaneously corroborative records of St. Matthew's account of a bright "new" star from around 5 BC. Supernovae also leave traces in the firmament, in the form of faint, wispy clouds of gas, dust and X-ray radiation whose rate of expansion and decay can be used to estimate the time of their genesis. So far, no supernova remnants have been found that can be dated back to around the birth of Christ.

To me, the most likely circumstance giving rise to the "Star of Bethlehem" is a planetary conjunction, where two planets become visually close to each other in the sky. The human eye can resolve two objects

down to a separation of about 1 arc-minute (or what 30 cm looks like from a kilometre away¹). If two bright planets get closer to each other in the sky than 1 arc-minute, they will therefore appear as a single point of light, and one that shines with their combined light (unless one “occults” - passes in front of - the other, an extremely rare phenomenon indeed).

If we believe that Jesus was a “spring baby” born around 5 BC, it is a simple matter to run a planetarium program to look for any planetary conjunctions that happened at around such a time, such is our precise knowledge of planetary orbits. And, if we do, we find that on 8th May, 6 BC, Venus and Jupiter would have been so close to each other in the eastern morning sky as to appear as a single brilliant point of light, a state of affairs that only lasted for a day or so.

As mentioned already, Venus is the brightest of the planets – and Jupiter is the second brightest. Such a close conjunction would have been as striking as it is uncommon, and could certainly have been taken as a portent of glad tidings by the Magi. And whilst astrology today is regarded as so much credulous mumbo-jumbo, the astrological implications of such a close conjunction of Venus and Jupiter would have been of great significance to scholars at the time. Venus was associated with fertility and general well-being, whilst Jupiter was regarded as “the Kings of the Gods” by the Romans, also linked with prosperity and good fortune – a heady astrological combination indeed!

St. Matthew also noted that the star “went with them ...and stood over where the Child lay”. An even closer Venus/Jupiter conjunction happened on 12 August 3 BC. At that time of the year, the ecliptic (the orbital plane of the planets along which they appear to run in the sky) would have been almost perpendicular to the horizon. This means that as the combined planets rose, they would seem to do so vertically, thus “standing” over the east. Although an August date isn’t a good as a fit with the likely time of year of Jesus’ birth, we don’t actually know when that was. Astronomically speaking, it’s a better fit with St. Matthew’s account.

So should you be up and around early on a clear January morning, take a look towards the south-eastern horizon. You might catch a glimpse of what may well have been a part of the Star of Bethlehem...

Keith Hodges.

Christmas Tree Festival in St. John’s Church

The Christmas Tree Festival was highly successful this year. Thank you to everyone who supported us, either by taking part or viewing. It was a wonderful opportunity for everyone to spend time in the church chatting, having a cup of coffee or creating ideas on the craft table.

Many people recounted stories of their weddings in the church or other occasions. It brought back so many memories for some and created new ones for others.

When the “Bo Peeps” Nursery brought in their hand made tree, they sat amongst the sheep and sang Christmas Songs. They then had a short tour of the Church.

Remember to think up ideas for this December 2024. You could always submit a family Christmas tree.
JAB

Percy Pigeon’s Perceptions

Good day to you all. I hope you enjoyed your festivities although they seem a long time ago now. As always we really enjoyed the music. We do thank all of you who put out food for avians. We particularly

¹ A foot at five furlongs - Ed

enjoyed cake crumbs, croutons, and sandwich crusts. It is very cosy in our winter nest. The old Amazon box is a bit tired now but we have lined it well so we are quite snug. Sadly our summer roost, the Crazy Ash Tree fell into the rectory garden in early December. It was a casualty of ash die-back and had been teetering for quite a while. No one was injured but it made a bit of a mess of a fence and neighbouring garden as well as the rectory grounds. Ash die back is a serious and destructive disease of ash trees, caused by a fungus. It is very likely that other trees in Six Acre Wood are similarly affected. We shall need to reconnoitre for a new summer roost, though none will be as tall as the C.A.T.

Winter is a trying time for all of us isn't it, but we must all eat and heat. Vital! We saw some foxes demolishing a turkey carcass retrieved from a rubbish bag left out early. I think they ate well this time. We know that food waste should be in the wheelie bin, but the wildlife won't complain if you want to invite rodents around your homes by leaving it in black bags.

As often happens, the period before Christmas was mild, but as my mother, Patsy, used to say, "As the days get longer, the cold gets stronger". It is good to have more light again though, despite all the rain. As I write, there are few signs of Spring, but bulbs are pushing up through the sodden soil and the snowdrops will soon be in bloom. Today also a few snow flurries which is bad news for us as snow covers our food-foraging ground. Please remember all avians at this time with anything you can spare. Coo coo

Which of our Christmas Traditions are Actually Rooted in the Bible?

This question came to mind when it became apparent how much Midnight Mass means to some people, including many who don't come to church very often. I can remember as a child being puzzled by carols like the Holly and the Ivy. There's nothing about holly or ivy in the biblical nativity story, nor deer running or choirs and merry organs. Only holly features in the verses of the carol and they seem to be more about His suffering and Death than about His Birth. *I saw three ships come sailing in!* Bethlehem isn't even near the coast. I've been told that that the carol actually refers to camels – ships of the desert, but, even so, none of the verses bears much relation to the bible story. So I'm not convinced. I also struggled with the Rocking Carol: *Little Jesus, sweetly sleep, do not stir; We will lend a coat of fur, We will rock you, rock you, rock you, We will rock you, rock you, rock you. See the fur to keep you warm, Snugly round your tiny form.* Where would the fur have come from? And, anyway, when I was at infant school, a form was a kind of bench. (I wasn't a particularly bright child.)

So what do we know? We don't know the date of our Lord's Birthday. The Bible doesn't tell us that it was *in the bleak midwinter*. There are some grounds to think that He might have been born in the Autumn at the Old Testament Feast of Tabernacles. After all, He died and rose from the dead at Passover and the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. It would be fitting if He were born at the third of the three great feasts. But we are not told. Midwinter was probably chosen to celebrate His Birth because people already held festivals at this time of year and because Jesus is the Light of the World. John 1: 4 *In him was life; and the life was the light of men. 5 And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.*

Even if Jesus was born at midwinter, it very seldom snows in Bethlehem. There was only one inn in the little town of Bethlehem (Luke 2⁷). So Mary and Joseph didn't go from one inn to another looking for one kindly innkeeper. The Bible doesn't mention that Mary rode a donkey from Nazareth. Both she and Joseph may have had to walk. (The carol *Little Donkey* is a lovely carol, but we never sing it right!)

Neither is the presence of other animals in the stable mentioned, although it seems likely that they were there. The only animals which are definitely present in the nativity story are the sheep on the hillside which the shepherds watched by night. The Bible doesn't say anything about their bringing a lamb for the Holy Family, though they may have done.

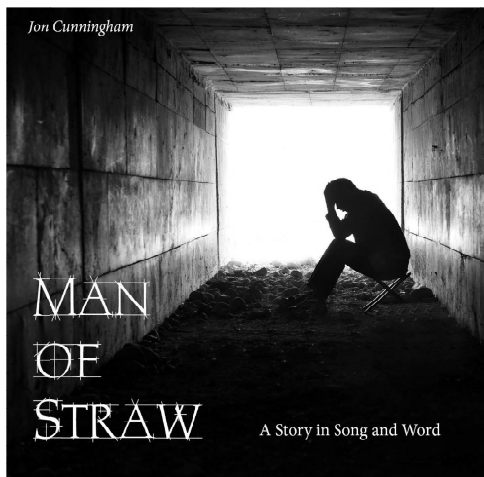
We include three kings in the story with their *sacred gifts of mystic meaning* and usually think of them as arriving shortly after the shepherds have left the stable. The Gospel, however, refers to them as magi. We assume that they were also kings because we see them as fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72. If, in fact, they do fulfil Isaiah 60 (which also refers to gold and incense, but not myrrh), the chapter also mentions camels and dromedaries. So maybe the magi were accompanied by camels, to ride or to carry their goods. We only assume that there were three of them because there were three gifts. We are not actually told how many kings there were. The mystic meanings of the sacred gifts (gold for the King, incense for God the High Priest, myrrh for the suffering Sacrifice) make sense, but they are not to be found in the Bible. Neither does the Bible name the magi. The names Balthazar, Melchior and Gaspar are later inventions.

The Gospel (Matthew 2¹¹) actually says that the wise men came to the house where the young child was. This implies that Joseph had found better accommodation than the stable by this time. (After all, he possibly had family in Bethlehem.) Given that Herod murdered not just babies, but all the children under two years old, the visit of the magi might have been some time after our Lord's Birth.

Jesus was presented in the Temple when He was forty days old. Bethlehem is not far from Jerusalem. My inference is that the Holy Family returned to Bethlehem after the Presentation and that it was after that that the magi came with their gifts. God warned the kings not to return to Herod but to go home another way and told Joseph to take Mary and the child into Egypt, where they stayed until Herod died. It was only then that they returned to Nazareth.

Many of our traditions and a lot of what we think we know about Christmas go beyond what is to be found in the Bible. That is not necessarily a bad thing. We do, however, have to keep our feet on the ground. Never insist on a belief which cannot be supported by Scripture. And certainly don't believe anything which is contrary to what the Bible says.

Man of Straw – Story and Synopsis



The idea and inspiration for *Man of Straw* began as a response to the growing negative and derogatory image developing of homeless, unemployed, elderly and disabled people, in fact almost anyone needing our help and support, being of no worth and a burden on society. This is a harmful road to travel and in all my experiences and involvement with many people like those mentioned in this story, I have found that it couldn't be further from the truth. (Words & Music by © Jon Cunningham)

A Story in Song and Word, *Man of Straw* which will be presented at St Michael's Church on 24th February at 7.00 pm. Admission is free and there will be a retiring collection in aid of Cancer Research UK.

[Those who have seen this in other places have been very moved by it and you will experience a very meaningful evening in an extremely good cause if you are able to attend.]

From the Registers

Holy Baptism:

25th November

James Dixon

Howlsmere Close

Funerals:

16th November

Claude Hallett Oxenbury (98)

Rochester Road Halling

7th December

Baby Angelina Dunn

Strood

Galton Day Unit Update

In December, I wrote about our forthcoming visit to the Galton Day Unit, which is the chemotherapy unit at Medway Hospital. Members of St Michael's choir and congregation visited the unit with me on the afternoon of 21st December to sing Christmas carols unaccompanied for the patients and staff there.

We had our list of well-known carols to sing and I had a recorder for a note to start on! We sang in the porch as usual because of the vulnerability of the patients and we made a lovely sound, as we had a mixture of soprano, alto and men's voices. The reception staff asked if they could take a video and pictures and tried to stop the automatic sliding doors by putting a bin in the way! Needless to say, this kept going for a walk and had to be repositioned several times!

The nurses came by, stopped for a short while and then went about their business. I got to see my favourite nurse, Megan (although they were all my favourites!) and we had a quick hug. Sadly, most of the nurses I had known in 2021 had moved on to other departments and there were only a couple of others still there – Caroline, the staff nurse, Amy and Antonia. Still, it was very emotional going back there, as I expected it would be!

Six months after finishing chemotherapy, I was still so elated I had got through it, that I managed to complete two 5K races; one to raise money for the Unit and one for Cancer Research. The nurses told me they were planning to get a new piece of equipment to find veins so I think it went towards that. I don't know whether I would ever have the energy to run again, but hopefully, we will continue to sing at Christmas for them instead!

A lady came out with her daughter after having treatment and sat on the bench outside. We had a lovely, brief chat about our mutual experiences and I said she might get cold, sitting there. She wanted to sit and listen however and requested a carol. She sang it with us...then requested another! She finally left with her daughter with a smile on her face.

Other patients left saying Merry Christmas to us so it was very moving. When we had finished, we left a card and some chocolates for the nurses and I said goodbye to Megan. I stood at reception with a mask on and gave my Christmas wishes to the patients still sitting in the waiting room. I felt very emotional, grateful and most of all, incredibly humble – I had got through it and I hoped that they would too!

Thank you to everyone who came along to sing and I hope you will be able to join us again this year.
Dawn Gates.



Tommy's Taking Points

I enjoyed Christmas. We had family over for Christmas Eve and some stayed till after church the next day (including Lolly). Then there were all the people we saw in church. I do love meeting people, making a fuss of them and being made a fuss of. Sometimes I get carried away and run off with people's hats, gloves and scarves. Master remonstrates. He also reminds me that not everybody likes dogs – though the vast majority seem to. We've had a good time seeing lots of people at a time of year when there are so many celebrations going on.

Walks, however, have been a bit curtailed, what with the short days and the weather. Also Master has been a bit under the weather himself. He's grateful for your prayers and offers of help and hopes soon to be back to normal – whatever that is!
Tommy.