

Services March 2023			
Lent 2 5 th March	9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling.	Genesis 12 vv 1-4a p13 Romans 4 vv 1-17 p1131 John 3 vv 1-17 p1065	
Lent 3 12 th March	9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling.	Exodus 17 vv 1-7 p75 Romans 5 vv 1-11 p1132 John 4 vv 5-42 p1066	
Lent 4 Mothering Sunday 19 th March	9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling.	I Samuel 16 vv 1-13 p287 Ephesians 5 8-14 p1176 (Halling only) John 9 vv 1-41 p1075	
Lent 5 Passion Sunday 26 th March	9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling.	Ezekiel 37 vv 1-14 p868 Romans 8 vv 5-11 p1134 John 11 vv 1-45 p1077	
Holy Communion Cuxton Wednesdays 9.30		Holy Communion Halling Thursdays 9.30	
1 st March Ember Day	Jeremiah 15 vv 10-21 John 6 vv 60-71	2 nd March	Jeremiah 17 vv 5-18 John 7 vv 1-13
8 th March	Jeremiah 20 vv 7-18 John 8 vv 12-20	9 th March	Jeremiah 21 vv 1-10 John 8 vv 21-30
15 th March	Jeremiah 24 vv 1-10 John 9 vv 24-41	16 th March	Jeremiah 25 vv 1-14 John 10 vv 1-10
22 nd March	Jeremiah 30 vv 1-11 John 11 vv 28-37	23 rd March	Jeremiah 30 vv 12-22 John 11 vv 38-44
29 th March	Jeremiah 33 vv 1-13 John 13 vv 1-11	30 th March	Jeremiah 33 vv 14-26 John 13 vv 12-20

Copy Date April Magazine: February 10th 8.30 am Rector

The Rev. Roger Knight, The Rectory, Rochester Road, Cuxton, ME2 1AF, Tel. (01634) 717134 email. 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.

Flowers in Church

We all enjoy the beautiful flower arrangements we see in both St Michael's and St John's. Thanks to those who so skilfully arrange them. I have had a request for more volunteer flower arrangers at St Michael's. It is obviously a very enjoyable and fulfilling task. If you would like to have a go, please contact Merrilyn on 714026. It is also the case that flowers are quite expensive. So, even if you don't see yourself as a flower arranger, any donations towards the cost of flowers in either church would be gratefully received.

Meeting to Elect Churchwardens (formerly Vestry Meeting) & Annual Parochial Church Council Meeting
These will take place on Saturday 22nd April at 10.00 at St John's Church Halling. If you are already on the Electoral Roll, you need do nothing this year. If not and you would like to be on the Electoral Roll (and are 16 or older, baptized, resident in the parish or a regular worshipper in one of our churches), please speak to Joyce Haselden. You need to be confirmed and at least 21 to be a churchwarden and 16 and confirmed to be on the PCC. Unless you are under 18, you cannot stand for election to the PCC until you have been on the Electoral Roll for at least six months. Please consider prayerfully whether you ought to stand for either of these offices or to be a sidesman. We shall also need to elect two representatives to the deanery synod this year, who will *ex officio* sit on the PCC as will the churchwardens. The APCM will also hear statutory and other reports and may discuss issues which are of relevance to the mission of the Church.

St John's Draw (January): £5 each to Mrs G Mitchell (61), Mrs G Mitchell (62) & Mrs J Terry (125).

Church Hall Draw (February): 1st prize - Matthew Wells, 2nd prize - Jack Payne, 3rd prize - Trudy Fenton-Scott



What is Poverty?

Absolute poverty is when people really do not have enough to sustain life. We see those harrowing scenes on our television screens when there are famines in various parts of the world and we are shown pictures of adults and children on the point of death from hunger. We may well feel that we can do something, however little, by sending money via appropriate charities. Absolute poverty is not necessarily acute. It can be chronic, people just about surviving sometimes for many years. "The World Bank's poverty definition says, 'A person is considered poor if his or her income level falls below some minimum level necessary to meet basic needs.' It sets this minimum level, or international poverty line, as living on less than \$1.90 a day. Just under 385 million children live in extreme poverty worldwide." That's a sobering thought.

Very much in our thoughts recently has been the subject of poverty in our own country. Hopefully, there are very few people in this part of the world dwelling in absolute poverty – at real risk of dying of starvation or disease. There are, however, many people in Britain today who would be considered poor. We talk about relative poverty, but what do we mean? St Paul said that he was content if he had food and clothing, but most of us would expect more than that out of life. Jesus famously had nowhere to lay His Head, but nearly everyone would hope for a nice warm bed in a safe and secure house.

So what is poverty in twenty first century Britain? We older people sometimes find it hard to see that someone is poor because he or she hasn't got things that weren't even invented when we were young or, if they had been developed, most of us didn't have them. How can this woman say she can't afford both eating and heating when she's got a television, a mobile 'phone and a home computer? How can he plead poverty when he runs a car and goes down the pub every Saturday night? If I couldn't put food on the table, I might think, the internet connection would have to go. But we shouldn't be too hasty to judge, as we shall discuss.

I had better state my own position and be aware of the danger of complacency. At no time in my life have I gone short of the basic necessities of life. We were far from rich when I was a child, but there was always enough of the things we really needed. In fact, we were better off than many families in the village where I grew up. We were the second household to have a TV set and my father got two weeks holiday a year when most people only had one. Both my childhood homes were modern bungalows which were far more comfortable than many of the older cottages and houses round about, though at first we had a fire only in one room, no double glazing and no telephone or car. I remember the arrival of the spin drier (which saved the labour of putting clothes through the wringer), the vacuum cleaner, the refrigerator (in response to having to bury some pork chops one hot Summer), and – wonder of wonders – the twin tub washing machine. So we were better off than a lot of people at the time, but the way we lived then would probably be regarded as unacceptable for most people in this country today.

Neither of my parents was born with a silver spoon in their mouths and the fact that we lived well was at least partly due to what many people would regard as old-fashioned values. You do what you have to do even when you don't want to do it. Waste not; want not. Live within your means. Neither a lender nor a borrower be.

These values still seem good to me, but there are caveats. How many people's jobs depend on the fact that millions of us do live beyond our means, buying things we don't need, borrowing to pay for them? In times of high inflation, when prices are going up much faster than the interest rate on savings accounts, it seems silly to save up for what you want rather than to buy it now on credit. "In 2019 900 million tonnes of food was thrown away worldwide, while an estimated 690 million people were affected by hunger. It was pointed out that tackling waste 'would cut greenhouse gas emissions, slow the destruction of nature through land conversion and pollution, enhance the availability of food and thus reduce hunger and save money at a time of global recession'". But how many jobs in the food industry (and its profitability) are directly related to waste? How many jobs in other industries depend on us buying what we don't actually need?

To me, wasting food is a sin. I hadn't realised quite how obsessive I appear to be on this subject until one year, on one of those festival days after Christmas, my niece I asked me what I wanted for dinner. "What you really want," she said. "Not what wants eating up!"

There could be a lot of redundancies if we all cut back. On the other hand, I cannot help but feel that we are living in a house of cards. If millions of people get into debt and subsequently default in a recession, not only they, but also their creditors, the banks, major commercial entities and the country at large are in trouble. If we consume the world's resources in an unsustainable manner and pollute what is left, surely the end is at hand.

Having said that we were relatively comfortably off when I was a child because my parents played by the rules, I have to be fair and acknowledge that they also had opportunities and abilities which not everybody has, even if he or she does play by the rules. It is also true that sometimes those who don't play by the rules do very well for themselves. *I myself have seen the ungodly in great power : and flourishing like a green bay-tree.* But they eventually get their comeuppance. *I went by, and lo, he was gone : I sought him, but his place could no where be found.* (Psalm 37).

Maybe I'm less sympathetic sometimes than I might be because I myself am only too content to live modestly. My car did only 350 miles last year. It's more than twenty years since I went on holiday. I never go to the cinema or theatre or attend a professional sporting event. I don't pay attention to fashion. I dress for decency, cleanliness and comfort in that order. There's nothing I really want that I haven't already got. I'd like to boast that this is because I am so spiritual that I'm not troubled by the *cares and riches and pleasures of this life*, that I have such a burning passion for the environment that I would never do anything which would contribute to its degradation and that, in any case, I'd rather give all my money to charity. The truth, however, is that I just can't be bothered with all that stuff and, in any case, I don't like disturbing the moths in my wallet.

COVID was, however, something of a revelation to me. I hadn't realised how important travel is to

so many people. I was astonished at how many people buy sandwiches every day. How hard is it to cut four slices of bread, butter them, lay ham or cheese on two of them, and put them together? Tip: Don't keep the butter in the fridge! I'm also amazed at the number of people who go to coffee shops. I've always been a bit shy walking into somewhere, sitting with and being served by people I don't know, but the embarrassment of being confronted with a long list of kinds of coffee, none of which I know what they are and none of which is as good as what I can make at home with a spoonful of instant, two sugars and a boiling mug of half and half milk and water, would be excruciating. I didn't really feel sorry for the people complaining on the radio that they couldn't afford to eat out twice a week anymore.

Every so often a member of parliament will set out to prove that it is not too difficult to live on benefits. It isn't for a few weeks for someone in that position. They already probably have a nice house in good repair, white goods and utilities in at least fair condition, no unmanageable debts, etc.. They might also adopt the sort of lifestyle I would think about adopting if I were unemployed. Get up and put on a casserole made of root vegetables and a cheap cut of meat like scrag end of mutton. While it is cooking (and the heat is warming the kitchen), go and sit in the library to read the papers and take out a few books to read. After lunch, perhaps take a walk around the park. Not too difficult if you are single and reasonably well educated. You could even think about how, if unemployment became long term, you might grow your own vegetables or even start a business, perhaps doing odd jobs for other people. I did gardening jobs for people (among other things) between colleges. I did that when I was twenty. I'm not sure that my sixty eight year muscles would be so eager.

But of course it's not like that if you've been out of work or even on low wages for any length of time. Things wear out. It may be very hard to pay bills like council tax and charges for gas and electricity without getting into debt. If you have a family, you have responsibilities towards them. You can't expect them to sit in the library or walk round the park all day to save on the heating. Imagine having three lively children in a small flat you can't afford to take out. You may not

want to go out yourself – especially if the weather is bad. On some estates, there are only convenience stores where you can't buy fresh fruit and vegetables or meat or fish. If you haven't got transport, you may only be able to feed your family on unhealthy pre-prepared food, which probably costs more in the corner shop than it would in a major supermarket. The real crux often comes, however, when something breaks and you can't afford to repair or replace it.

I heard a woman on the radio saying that, as she couldn't afford to repair the washing machine, she was sending her children to school in dirty clothes. I admit that my first thought was, "Why don't you rinse them out in the sink? My mother didn't have a washing machine when my sister and I were small children." But then I considered that perhaps they live in a flat where there is nowhere to dry things. I thought about that poor little boy who died from inhaling mould spores in the damp flat his family had to live in. Drying washing in an already damp flat would not be a good idea.

We used to be able to do more for ourselves. Country people would know how to live off the land to some degree. My grandmothers could skin a rabbit or pluck and draw a chicken – not that they particularly wanted to. As children, we watched our fathers and mothers and learned skills such as gardening, making and repairing things, cooking, knitting and sewing, just from them. Schools taught the boys woodwork and metalwork and gardening and the girls things like cooking and sewing. These subjects disappeared from the curriculum partly because of suggestions of sexism (though there is no reason why boys shouldn't be taught domestic science and girls craft skills and horticulture) but also because it came to be thought that pupils should set their sights on higher things than growing and cooking their own food, making and mending clothes, cleaning their own homes, driving the sort of car or motor bike you need to be a bit of a mechanic to keep on the road. You'd get qualifications leading to a good job and pay other people to perform these mundane tasks for you. If you cultivated a garden or allotment, lavished care on a classic car or made your own dresses, you would do so as a hobby rather than out of necessity. In the old days poor people were typically skinny,

working hard to get enough food just to live on, whereas the comfortably off were often comfortably plump. Now it is very often the other way round. Poor people get fat from eating the food they can afford – microwaved ready meals and takeaways – and perhaps not getting much exercise, whereas the more comfortably off go to the gym and carefully choose to eat healthily. Cooking a family meal from basic ingredients is no longer something that most people do every day, but something which rich people who are so inclined do occasionally for a hobby when they are entertaining friends.

The reality is that cooking a family meal from basic ingredients means having access to those foods, knowing how to prepare them and plenty of time. If we don't want to expect mothers (or conceivably fathers) to be in all day preparing the dinner, we have to accept that a lot of junk food will be consumed. Add in that junk food (like much of what is on the internet) is addictive and you will soon find that your children won't want anything else.

The internet. For most families an internet connection isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. If the rest of the world (including all your children's friends) are on social media, it is very hard to sustain a social life without internet access, mobile phones, etc.. The chances are that your children will be expected to use the internet for schoolwork. If you are in work or looking for a job, you will probably be expected to be online at home as well as at work. There are fewer shops than there used to be in the villages. You can have stuff delivered, but you nearly always have to order online. Banks and government departments are closing local branches and migrating us on line. They may not provide an address to write to and telephone helplines are often anything but helpful. One of my friends was refused a bank account because she wasn't on the phone. My bank keeps asking for a mobile number. Many employers expect you to be able to drive and have a car even if it's not a driving job. They don't want you relying on unreliable or non-existent public transport. Things we used to think of as luxuries, even things which have only recently been invented, have become necessities.

Moreover, the poor very often actually pay more for basics than the rich. If the rich can buy better quality, the goods may last longer and save money in the long run. Until recently, the way the energy market worked tended to result in the poor paying more per kilowatt hour than the rich for their electricity and gas. That is no longer the case because of the Ukraine war except that people who struggle to pay their bills are now being forced in large numbers onto pre-payment meters which charge more for the fuel used and have huge standing charges which customers can't avoid even if they use very little actual energy. A graduate planning a skiing holiday in the Cairngorms goes online and books a rail ticket at an amazingly low price. A poor pensioner hears that her sister is dying in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, hurries down to the station and is charged ten times for her ticket what the graduate paid for his.

Poverty is relative as well as absolute. It is relative to what you've been used to. Someone I know happily cycled to work for years until he could afford a car. Then he started driving to work, but when he could no longer afford to run the car, he went into debt rather than go back to his bike. We don't want to go backwards. I could live without a computer, car, fridge, washing machine, TV or radio, but I don't want to, and neither would most people once they had become used to having them. If I had a family, it would be

very hard to expect them to give up these luxuries which are so convenient that they have almost become necessities.

Poverty is also relative to what other people have got. One of the reasons why that person didn't want to go back to cycling to work (though he actually enjoyed cycling) was that his colleagues made fun of him for not driving. Cycling, like cooking, has become for many people a hobby rather than an unremarkable part of *the daily round, the common task*. Living in twenty first century Britain, there are certain basic standards to which we are expected to aspire if we want to fit in.

Inequality rubs salt into the wounds of poverty. As striking Amazon workers recently remarked, why should they be satisfied with £10-50 per hour when the top people in the company are millionaires or even billionaires? Come to think of it, in my first job, I was paid £10.50 per week. How times change!

Proverbs 30 goes for the middle ground with a prayer we might all be wise to offer: ⁸ *Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me:* ⁹ *Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.* Roger.

Foodbank

One of the ways in which we can help one another in the current financial crisis is by donating to Medway Foodbank. Items may be brought to church and this is the current list of what is most needed.

- Milk - UHT/long-life, semi or whole • Milk - UHT/long-life, semi or whole
- Instant Mash • Instant Mash
- Tinned Ham • Tinned Ham
- Tinned Corned Beef • Tinned Corned Beef
- Tomato Passata • Tomato Passata
- Dried Milk Powder • Dried Milk Powder
- Sponge Puddings • Sponge Puddings
- Rice Pudding • Rice Pudding
- Squash • Squash
- Instant Coffee - small jars/packs • Instant Coffee - small jars/packs

- Ketchup • Ketchup
- Razors • Razors
- Shaving Foam • Shaving Foam
- Size 5 or Size 6 Nappies • Size 5 or Size 6 Nappies
- Deodorants • Deodorants
- Toothbrushes • Toothbrushes
- Toothpaste • Toothpaste

We CURRENTLY PREFER NOT TO

baked beans, pasta, and tinned soup. baked beans, pasta, and tinned soup.

THANK YOU for joining us to help stop UK hunger! Your support makes a difference.

See [Medway Foodbank | Helping Local People in Crisis](#) for how you can help the Foodbank in other ways (such as by donating money or time) or for how you can request any assistance that you yourself may require.

Christians Against Poverty

Christians Against Poverty is a leading in agency in assisting people with debt problems. CAP cannot help you pay your debts but does provide invaluable advice on how to manage your finances. CAP is a Christian organisation, but you don't have to be a Christian to benefit from its help. CAP will pray for you if you want them to, but there is no obligation! CAP UK | Home Phone: 01274 760720 Email: info@capuk.org if you need help with debt or would like to volunteer to help CAP in any way.

Thomas Stevens Trust-Cuxton's Only Charity

We really are living in challenging times, with permanent and temporary jobs disappearing overnight (often with no alternative employment options), heavily reduced hours for those in employment because of reduced ordering of products, severe stress and tiredness because of the worry of providing for oneself and family, or acting as a carer for someone in extra need. The Thomas Stevens Trust is here to help those in difficult circumstances to partially adapt their vulnerability, to overcome some of their food and fuel supply problems, thereby maintaining a semblance of normal healthy living.

If you have lived in Cuxton for 2 years, and believe we can help out in any small way, please contact us on thomasstevenscharity@hotmail.com

Pets & the Financial Crisis

Some people are now finding that they are unable to keep their family pets because of money problems. If you think you could permanently re-home or foster temporarily a dog in this situation, you could contact the Dogs' Trust or another similar charity <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk> . Cats Protection and several other charities re-home cats <https://www.cats.org.uk/adopt-a-cat> You could also try contacting the RSPCA.

Crossing Picture?

At the top of Sundridge Hill, where there are now two bridges, decades ago the Victoria Line crossed the main road on a level crossing. I'd love to see a picture of the crossing (and possibly copy it) if any of you have one you would be prepared to share. More likely, you may remember that there was a signal box at that point until 1968. Hauling trains up from Strood to Sole Street was considered a major test for early steam locomotives. There was a nasty accident in 1897 when a train was derailed coming down from Sole Street towards Cuxton. I think it was during the First World war that a bus overturned at the crossing at the top of Sundridge Hill & the crossing keeper telephoned for a detachment of soldiers to rescue the passengers.

Personnel Movements

The last few weeks have seen, due to circumstances, the retirements of four of our key parish workers. **Dave and Di Maxwell** have, after more than four decades of service, had to resign from the choir. When I first came here, thirty six years ago, they had already been members for some time, as were their daughters, Heidi & Trudi. As well as their commitment to our music, they had been involved in various dramatic productions in both Cuxton and Halling churches. Dave and Di led the youth club. They were among the leaders of the marriage preparation team. They served on the PCC. Dave was also involved in a number of projects in the Strood Deanery and the wider Church, as well as serving as a guide at Rochester Cathedral.

When the two parishes of Cuxton and Halling were merged in 1975, St John's church was in a poor state of repair. People in both villages threw themselves into the task of its restoration. This was completed in 1987 and it became possible to hold services once again in both villages every Sunday. We had had a joint choir, mainly consisting of Cuxton people, but, if we were to have sung services in both churches every Sunday morning, we would now need a separate organist and choir for Halling. **Gillian Feraday** very kindly took up the task, playing the organ for us every week (later to be joined by Dorothy Smitherman) and organising a choir for us. It was this which made the weekly service at St John's viable. Unfortunately, the choir diminished in numbers over the years and, having been suspended during COVID, has not yet sprung back to life. Gillian has continued to play for us until unable to continue owing to ill health at the end of last year. We are very grateful for her long years of service.

Malcolm Curnow has been another stalwart of the parish since long before I arrived here. He has served as churchwarden, sacristan, server, PCC member and hall manager over a long period. Malcolm was always doing jobs around the church and hall and put a tremendous amount of time and effort into serving the Church and the wider community. Sadly he has had to relinquish all these roles and has now moved into a retirement home.

We are indeed very grateful for all these four people for all that they have done over the years. They remain in our thoughts and I am sure that they will enjoy keeping in touch. Roger.

Of the Planets and the Seven Sisters:

In his on-line pre-ambles to February's newsletter, Roger reminisced about his past cycling exploits in the Holy Land and remarked upon the clarity and beauty of the night skies of Jordan. We in Cuxton are perhaps not quite so blessed with such night-time sky conditions, but nevertheless our local night sky is still relatively "dark" when compared to the light-polluted vistas experienced by many people who live in our overcrowded corner of south-east England. If, on a clear, moonless night, you are able to get just a short distance away from the village lights and into places such as Upper Bush or the southern valley of Ranscombe reserve, then you will still be able to appreciate the beauty of dark night skies.

Roger also mentioned the visibility of planets, and in mid-February at around 8.00 pm, it is quite easy to locate both Jupiter and Mars in our evening sky. Jupiter is setting low in the west and looks like a brilliant star, noticeably brighter than any "real" star. Mars can also be found, above and to the west (right) of the unmistakable constellation Orion, which is itself high in the south during early February evenings. If you follow the line of the three stars of Orion's belt westwards, you will see a bright, orange-tinted star called Aldebaran – the "Eye of the Bull", the brightest star in the constellation of Taurus. Above Aldebaran can be seen another orange "star" of equal brightness: this is the planet Mars.

To the east of Mars can be found one of the most enigmatic sights in the heavens, the little cluster of bright stars called the Pleiades, or "Seven Sisters". Most people can see six stars at a glance, but a view through binoculars can show twenty or thirty tiny, bluish points of light. It is a truly beautiful sight. In Greek mythology, the Pleiades were the seven daughters of the Titan, Atlas, who was condemned by Zeus to forever bear the weight of the heavens as punishment for rebelling against

the Olympian gods. Without their father to protect them, the Pleiades attracted the amorous attentions of the nearby hunter, Orion, and so to save them, Zeus transformed them into the stars we see today. This does seem a bit like punishing the victims rather than the miscreant, but I suppose that what with them being mythical gods and everything, the old Greek deities really didn't need a reason...

Hebrew texts also mention the Pleiades. In the Book of Job, Chapter 38 v.31, the text of the King James Bible records the rhetorical peroration made by God to the much-put-upon Job, saying:

"...Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion...?"

The "sweet influences" may refer to the ancient agricultural significance of the Pleiades, rather than to the attractions of their womanly progenitors: the star cluster is in conjunction with the Sun in May, a traditional time of fruit trees blossoming and the sowing of seed.

The Pleiades have been traditionally known for their seven stars. In various Greek and Roman writings, they are referred to as the Starry Seven, the Seven Virgins or the Seven Atlantic Sisters. These ancient descriptions come from days long before the advent of telescopes or binoculars, yet today, only six Pleiads are easily visible to the unaided eye. This state of affairs is supported by modern measurements of the brightness of the stars of the Pleiades. Only six of them are above "5th. magnitude", the accepted threshold for naked eye visibility.

One of the oldest traditions concerning the cluster is the persistent myth of a "lost Pleiad". The Greeks identified her as Electra, who is said to have veiled her face at the burning of Troy. Another story casts Merope in the role, as she reputedly hid her face in shame at having married

a mortal, the King of Corinth, while all her other sisters were wedded to gods.

The Greek poet Aratus (310-240 BC) refers to the tradition of the “Lost Pleiad” when he wrote:

*“...Their number seven, though the myths oft say
And poets feign, that one has passed away...”*

This tradition is not confined to Greek mythology. The story of a lost Pleiad also appears in Japanese lore and in the legends of Australian aborigines, natives of the Gold Coast of Africa and the head-hunters of Borneo.

*“...Their Sister Stars that were once seven
Mourn for their missing mate in Heaven...”*

It seems that the legend of the lost Pleiad may have a basis in fact, however. Those modern brightness measurements have revealed that one of the Pleiades, Pleione, is variable in brightness by at least half a magnitude, and may well once have been above the threshold of naked eye visibility.

Modern telescopes and long exposure photography, along with “proper motion” studies of the stars, suggest that the number of stars in the Pleiades cluster could in fact be as many as 800.

Curiously, the 11th century Talmud (the central text of Rabbinic Judaism) uses the term “kimah”, to describe the number of stars in the Pleiades, a word which means “over one hundred”.

Another thing revealed by long exposure photography is that the Pleiades are veiled in fine, dense threads of nebulosity, like cirrus clouds or interstellar cobwebs. These are certainly not visible to the naked eye today, yet some translations of the aforementioned Book of Job refer to the “Chains of the Pleiades”. The 7th, century Arabian poet Amr al Kais also hints at the nebulosity:

*“The hour when the Pleiades appeared in the
firmament
Like the folds of a silken sash variously decked
with gems...”*

Perhaps the most famous reference to the Pleiades in English literature occurs in Tennyson’s *Locksley Hall*...

*“Many a night from yonder ivied casement, ere I
went to rest
Did I look on great Orion, sloping slowly to the
west
Many a night I saw the Pleiads, rising thro’ the
mellow shade
Glitter like a swarm of fireflies tangled in a silver
braid...”*

Today, science tells us that the light of the Pleiades is percolated through an area of space suffused with clouds of interstellar dust, hence their hazy appearance on long exposure photographs. It seems that perhaps the eyes of our forefathers were much more sensitive than ours are today, after all. Or perhaps their night skies were that much cleaner and clearer.

We know today that the stars of the Pleiades lie at a distance of over 400 light years. A “light year” is, of course, the distance a photon of light travels in the vacuum of space in one year. Given that the speed of light is around 186,000 miles *per second*, 400 light years is a simply unimaginable distance. Indeed, light travels so fast that it took human civilisation thousands of years to realise that it even travelled at all, and yet in astronomical terms, the Pleiades are really only in our back yard. After all, the most distant galaxy visible to modern telescopes is 32 *billion* light years away, taking into account the expansion rate of the universe. To the simple mind of Man, astronomical distances are utterly incomprehensible.

Roger concluded February’s church magazine with a quote by Freeman Dyson: *“To worship God means to recognise that mind and intelligence are woven into the fabric of our universe in a way that altogether surpasses our comprehension...”*

I would contend that a few minutes looking at a clear, moonless night sky achieves much the same thing. Indeed, I would like to finish these ramblings with a quote by scientist and philosopher J.B.S. Haldane, words that perhaps reflect one of the underlying truths espoused in the Book of Job referred to earlier... *“...the universe is not only stranger than we suppose, it is stranger than we CAN suppose...”*

Keith Hodges, 25th January 2023.

From the Registers

Funerals:

27 th January	Brian Lewis Mitchell	formerly of Halling
31 st January	Thomas Coates	The Caravan Site
2 nd February	Colin Charles Smitherman	Snodland
9 th February	Volodymyr Budnyk	Cuxton

Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child:

12 th February	Florian Eddie Kaczmarczyk	Woodhurst Close
---------------------------	---------------------------	-----------------

PERCY PIGEON'S PERCEPTIONS

Good day to you all. Philippa and I are spending some time now at the crazy ash tree. So much rain has meant we have a lot of repairs to make. It is not easy to find dry material though. I expect you too will be counting the cost of the weather damage to your gardens and setting about repairs. So many plants will have been lost: rotting in the ground. It seems a long long time since last summer's heat wave and drought! There was so much lying water and mud everywhere recently. Dogs and their walkers were not finding their exercise so easy as they squelched through it and then the frozen ground hurting their paws. The snowdrops are out so Spring will soon arrive. I hope you are remembering to put out food for all avians? Flat roofs are ideal feeding areas for us as we have a better view of potential predators. Gulls are a real nuisance with their noisy whooping and voracious appetites. The area in Halling around Low Meadow and Ferry Road seems to be a particular favourite for them.

We see very few cats in the winter. In warmer weather they lie in wait for us and then rush guerrilla-like at us but are seldom successful I'm pleased to say. Perhaps cats curl up under your radiators and conserve their energy. They are strange creatures, independent and self-willed. I heard of one who will only drink the cream at the top of a bottle of milk and another who will only eat if he has seen his person dispense it. Philippa and I watched one cat sitting on a drain grid staring intently at a plant trough obviously waiting for his rodent prey to dare to move. He sat there for hours.

We pigeons don't feel the cold as much as you human beans but we have strategies unavailable to you. Our feathers are thick and we ruffle them to maintain a warm layer. We squat to keep the cold wind from our bodies. Pigeons have a solution to cold feet too and that is by standing on one foot or squatting to cover both our legs at the same time. Usually, when you see pigeons doing this, it means that they are uncomfortably cold.

We are thinking of taking an Easter break to Peters Village this year. A tree-mail from cousin Paul says there is little there of interest to avians and few trees, but curiosity will probably take us there next month for a look-see once the squabs are finally fledged and leave home. Have you ever wondered why you never seem to see baby pigeons? That is because newly-hatched pigeons stay in the nest for up to six weeks - longer than most bird species. When they do finally leave, they look almost exactly like a fully-grown adult pigeon, other than the downy feathers on their head and the lack of red around their eyes. A pigeon's eyes don't get red until between seven months and one year of age.

I leave you today with two jokes from my tree-mail:

I crossed my messenger pigeon with a parrot.

He delivers voice mail.

My messenger pigeon was crossed with a woodpecker.

He knocks on the door before delivering the message.

Coo coo.

Rainham Ladies Choir

We're looking forward to a concert to be held at St John's on 13th March at 7.30 pm. Please make sure that it is in your diaries as it will be another evening not to be missed. Entrance free, but a collection will be taken. No advance tickets. Just turn up.

We decided to hold a fund-raising event this year in order to boost our donations to the Children's Society so a Bring and Share lunch took place in the church hall on Sunday 29th January. There was a good turnout and I don't think anyone went short of food! We had a raffle and a Bring and Buy sale as well as a short quiz on the subject of slang expressions used by the younger generation. Unsurprisingly, this proved quite a challenge for most of us, although some people managed to work out a few of the answers.

Apart from having a very enjoyable afternoon, we raised £190, which will really help to increase our donations this year. The fact is that people are using less and less cash, so collecting coins in a box at home is not as easy as it used to be. Nevertheless, our box holders have, as always, been extremely generous and the total raised so far from the box collection is £168.71 (with a couple of boxes still to be counted). This makes a provisional total of £358.71, which is excellent.

Many thanks to everyone who donated in any way at all. If anyone would like to help us to support the Children's Society, please contact me on 01634 727424.

Julia Wells

In Memoriam

Parishioners were sorry to hear of the death of Janet Greaves, who for many years, was the principal library assistant at Cuxton, as well as taking undertaking a variety of roles as a member of Cuxton United Reformed Church.

Many of you will also remember Terry Woolmer who died in November. He was born in Cuxton and lived here for most of his life, before moving to Essex. Terry was a great lover of the Cuxton countryside.



Tommy's Talking Points

There's an old saying, "If Candlemas Day be fair and bright, Winter will take another bite." Candlemas Day is the last Day of Christmas – the 2nd February – when Mary & Joseph presented the forty day old Jesus in the Temple and He was recognised by Simeon & Hannah as the Light of the World. The characteristic Candlemas flower is the snowdrop and there were plenty of them around in the churchyard, though not, so Master observed, as many as usual at Upper Bush.

Maybe, we looked at the wrong time. I don't like it when he deviates from our normal routes to look at something different and I hang back and make him come to look for me. Anyway, there is this old belief that a Spring-like Candlemas Day will be followed by more harsh weather before the true end of Winter. So it has proved this year. A very pleasant, sunny, mild Candlemas has been followed by some more very cold, frosty weather. At least, when the mud is frozen, Master and I come in from our runs clean and dry. It has also been observed that the house stays cleaner longer when we stay dry.

I was very surprised to hear on *Tweet of the Day* one morning the guy who introduced it complaining about his subject. They usually coo over their chosen birds for the sweetness of their song, the beauty of their plumage or their rarity. But this guy started by saying, "You never see a dead magpie," as if that is something you might want to see. They are great survivors, flocking together, cackling to one another to preserve the unity of the group. They intimidate other creatures. One even got into a stand off with me. They eat smaller birds and their eggs. Master tries to be kind to the wildlife. He sees that there is water available for the birds and animals. He puts out his crumbs every morning. For several years, a family of blackbirds used to wait for them. Now it's nearly all magpies and Master thought that they had probably killed the blackbirds. We did see one blackbird, however, but the magpies didn't let him get to the bread. When he was young, magpies were quite rare, and it was exciting to see one (better to see two if you know the rhyme). Now, he's not so welcoming when it comes to magpies. But I wonder why you humans seem to like some creatures less than others and find fault with the way they behave? Even magpies have to eat. If he eats chicken, why shouldn't magpies eat robins? And who can blame them for protecting one another? That seems like something we all ought to do. You humans are strange.

Tommy.