

**St Paul's Methodist Church, Crawley**  
*Extraordinary Times*  
*a magazine to help us through COVID-19*  
**Issue 40** **January 3rd 2021**

*From your minister...*

Customary at this time of year to reflect upon the previous twelve months. But you could be forgiven for not wishing to dwell for too long on 2020 – in many ways it may be a year you wish to forget. With much of our activities put on hold, we haven't been able to make this a year of great or significant achievement.

Many of our plans have been suspended: including holidays, visits to family, and of course our church life. Some of us have spent most of 2020 on furlough – a word that I'm guessing none of us had ever heard before, but now is a part of our everyday vocabulary. Some of us have lost our jobs in 2020, and have seen our finances stretched to breaking point as a result. Many of us have felt lonely and isolated, fearful and anxious: we are hoping and praying that in 2021 we will see the back of all this, and that we can resume something resembling normality.

The vaccination programme is of course our great hope, and we pray for tenacity and perseverance as we ride the storm of Winter and gradually see more and more of our population immunised. As 2020 slips away like a bad dream, we wait with as much optimism as we can muster for the Lord's deliverance, trusting in His faithfulness and providence.

I've been amazed at how the Bible has spoken so directly into our situation throughout the Coronavirus pandemic. In times as uncertain as these we need the comfort and inspiration of Scripture, and we can find it sometimes in the most obscure of places. Take Matthew's Gospel chapter 2, from verse 19 to 23. We don't often hear this passage read in church, but it's Matthew's account of Joseph taking his family to the neighbouring country of Egypt in order to escape Herod's genocide in Judea. It's unclear how long they remained there as refugees before returning, but it would have been a maximum of two years. We know that Jesus was born between 6 and 4 BC: because Quirinius was governor of Syria during this period. We also know that Herod died in 4 BC, which would effectively have ended his campaign to kill all the boys aged 2 and under.

If we look at Luke's Gospel we observe that the family didn't escape the country immediately after Jesus' birth: they hung around long enough to make the five mile journey from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to have him dedicated. Following Jewish tradition this would have taken place forty days after his birth, suggesting that the wise men didn't arrive until later. It seems highly unlikely that Joseph and Mary would risk a journey towards Herod (who had his palace in Jerusalem) if he had already ordered the killing of the boys in Bethlehem. And unfortunately the wise men had inadvertently set this act in motion (not so wise after all, then!)

However long Joseph, Mary and Jesus remained in exile, it would have been a time of great uncertainty for them. All the angelic visits had stopped; all the hope and promise seemed to have been abruptly terminated. Instead they were effectively isolated from their home and their people. Joseph and Mary, possibly

like some of us, must have been wondering whether God had abandoned them.

Deprived of his living as a carpenter, Joseph must have found it hard to provide for his family, particularly as a foreigner in a strange land. It may have lasted only a few weeks, but it could have dragged on for two years. It's easy for us to read the narrative now, knowing that eventually they could return home and resume a normal life – but at the time their future would have seemed as unclear and worrying as our lives during lockdown.

Eventually, at the point of Herod's death in 4BC, an angel appears again to Joseph to give him instructions for a safe return. That angelic visitation must have been the sweetest of all! But even then, Joseph learns that Archelaus, Herod's successor, is every bit as cruel as his father. So he makes the decision not to return to Bethlehem, where the family had originally settled after Jesus' birth, but to return to Nazareth in the north of the country where Joseph and Mary had originally met. And so their life could begin again.

Like Joseph and Mary, we must enter a new year facing a continuing challenge to our wellbeing and safety. If God seems quiet be assured that like Joseph and Mary, He has not forgotten you. His deliverance is sure, "his love reaches to the heavens, his faithfulness to the skies" (Psalm 36:5). Though you have had to spend an extended period in isolation and uncertainty, the Lord is still with us. His name is Immanuel – He lives amongst us.

Please note that under new tier four regulations our churches are closed for public worship. We would also like to dissuade you from entering the premises, apart from essential reasons such as cleaning or maintenance, in order to play our part in the fight against Covid and its new variant. For the time being you can join us for worship on the Trinity Facebook page live every Sunday at 10.45am, or by watching the recording afterwards. We will be sharing in an online Covenant service on Sunday January 10th. More about our annual Covenant in next week's newsletter. Look out too for my weekly live streamed messages and Bible studies on Facebook, which will resume on Wednesday January 6th at 2pm. These will be live on the Trinity page, but the recording will also appear on the St Pauls page.

May God bless you all and bring blessing for the New Year. *Ralph*

## **What's On**

**Every Sunday 10:45am** worship with Rev Ralph Ward

**Every Wednesday 2pm** Bible study with Rev Ralph Ward

**Find these live** on [Trinity's Facebook page](#) and [St Paul's Facebook page](#)  
with videos available afterwards

## **In your prayers**

**Give thanks to God** that there are now vaccines to combat Covid-19 and give thanks for the scientists who worked so hard to develop them in record time.

**Continue praying** for members of our own church community who have contracted the Covid virus and for all who need our prayers at this time.

**Send** your prayer requests to [ask.stpauls@gmail.com](mailto:ask.stpauls@gmail.com)

*Permission must be received from a person before their name is put on the Church prayer list*

## **A prayer for 2021** by Rev Richard Teal, President of Conference

Lord of the Year, as we stand at the gate of a New Year we approach it with anxiety. The vulnerability, exhaustion, fear and loss we have experienced in so many ways since March is still with us, but we also approach the new year with hope born in the fragility of the Christ-like God.

So in this hope lead us to live in trust, to love well, to care for your creation With gentleness and justice and to know that you hold us and the whole world in The palm of your hand to love and to cherish. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen

*God Knows* by Minnie Louise Haskins (1875-1957)

*And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:  
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."*

*And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your  
hand into the Hand of God.*

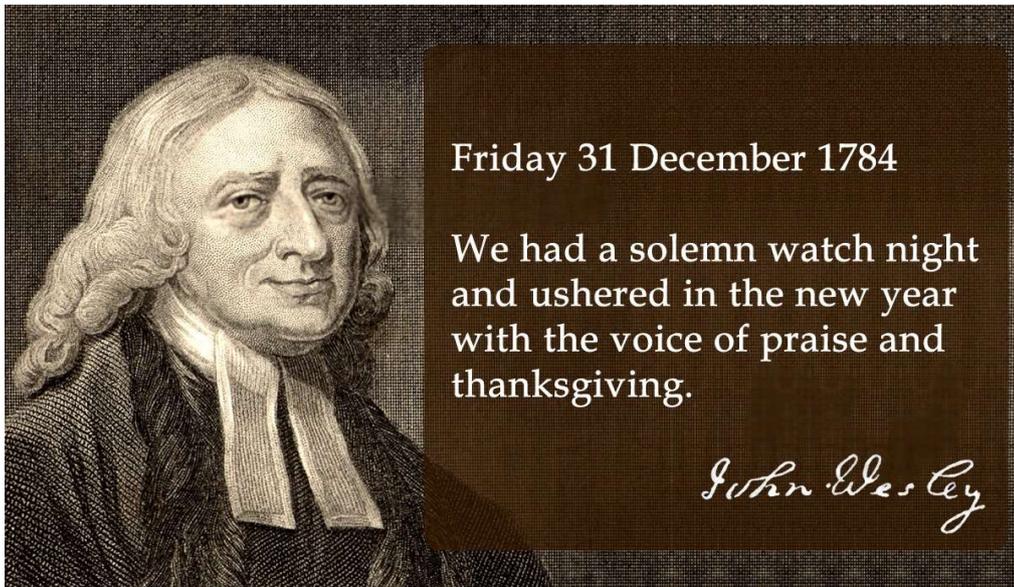
*That shall be to you better than light and  
safer than a known way."*

*So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God,  
trod gladly into the night.*

*And He led me towards the hills and the  
breaking of day in the lone East.*

This familiar poem was quoted by King George VI in his Christmas Day Broadcast in 1939 when the world was fearful because of war.

## **From John Wesley's diary of 1784**



## **Stamps for the Hospice**

Bobbie Gillett is still collecting used stamps for St Catherine's Hospice. We can't take them into St Paul's at present, so please collect them up at home until church is open again, when Bobbie will be able to pick them up. St Catherine's makes a significant amount of money by selling them on, so it's well worth doing.

## Epiphany in a time of Covid ?



### And finally – a few thoughts about cats

*Women and cats will do as they please,  
and men and dogs should relax and get used to the idea.*

Robert A. Heinlein

*There are two means of refuge from the misery of life — music and cats.*

Albert Schweitzer

*The smallest feline is a masterpiece.*

Leonardo da Vinci

*In ancient times cats were worshipped as gods;  
they have not forgotten this.*

Terry Pratchett

*Time spent with cats is never wasted.*

Sigmund Freud

*Wishing you all a truly blessed 2021*

### Contacts

**Rev Ralph** phone 01342 325877 email [rlphwrd@gmail.com](mailto:rlphwrd@gmail.com)

**Prayer requests & newsletter items** [ask.stpauls@gmail.com](mailto:ask.stpauls@gmail.com)

**St Paul's website** [www.crawleymethodistchurch.org.uk](http://www.crawleymethodistchurch.org.uk)

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