

ST GEORGE-IN-THE-EAST WITH ST PAUL

Newsletter for January 2011

Christmas and Epiphany

This year the opening words of T.S. Eliot's 1927 poem *The Journey of the Magi* described our own weather:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter....'*

though unlike the Magi we do not have to deal with *camels galled, sore-footed, refractory, lying down in the melting snow*. Did they actually travel through snow to get to Bethlehem? Unlikely, but it makes a great poem - like Christina Rossetti's *In the bleak mid-winter*.

The BBC's four-part drama *The Nativity* attempted to give an accurate impression of what it was really like - not just the various journeys, but the rejection and suspicion that Mary and Joseph had to face back home. The writers had researched the Magi well, and we got a sense of what was driving these deeply devout men, and why they avoided Herod. (One might quibble at the fact that they arrived the same night as the shepherds, but after all that is how the story is usually told.) There was a side-plot around a shepherd who couldn't pay his taxes because his wife was sick, which set the context of the Roman occupation. It was beautifully filmed and acted by a distinguished cast, and the effect was powerful - devout, yet unsentimental. It was good to have a 'straight' production like this, in contrast to the spin and hype of previous years' Christmas offerings, and the BBC are to be congratulated.

Here in the parish, our first offerings came before the snow. **News International's** carol service, as usual, featured their own choir, the choir of St Bride's Fleet Street and our school's choir, but this year was organised by a new team, who did an excellent job. The next day we had our **school service**, which included songs from the juniors' Christmas production (including two fine soloists). This told the nativity story from the point of view of the innkeeper and his wife, who took turns to open the door to a constant stream of requests for blankets and the arrival of visitors. Each time they tried to settle back to sleep, they blew each other a kiss ('goodnight, innkeeper' - 'goodnight, wife') but all in vain. As with the BBC, it showed how the story can be told faithfully but with a human face, and was acted with equal sincerity. It was impressive that every member of the large choir was word-perfect and sang the songs with enthusiasm; well done! (They also performed some of the songs at Trowers and Hamlin's carol service.)

Then came the snow - not too bad in London, but preventing some members of the congregation from setting out on their travels, and marooning others who had already gone out into the country to visit family and friends.

But we had a good number for our **parish carol service**. Susan Crocker enlisted Lucy and Alison (friends who sing with her in the LSO chorus) to provide a top line for all the descants - our grateful thanks to them! With their help, we managed a 3-part choir for a few items - our bass line was stuck in Hampshire (see below) - as well as carols by candlelight around the tree. Hannah, our new organist, rose splendidly to the occasion. Incidentally, we plan to include details of her concluding voluntaries on our service sheets, since she chooses these with care to fit the liturgical theme of the day. It was lovely to hear Olivier Messiaen's *Les Anges* (The Angels) on Christmas morning.

Numbers at the Christmas night and morning services were much as usual. The following day, for

the Feast of Stephen, a dozen of us in the side chapel managed to sing the service 'a capella' (without accompaniment), including *Good King Wenceslas* and other carols which had not featured in previous services.

Members of the congregation are currently dispersed on their travels - what will the weather hold over New Year? - but we re-convene for our own coming of the Magi on 2 January (keeping the Feast of the Epiphany on a Sunday rather than on the twelfth day of Christmas - an all-age service to start the year).

Particular thanks to all who contributed to Christmas flowers, to Annadale who persevered through the cold in providing lovely displays, and to Allan for his miracle in getting our concrete pillars to sprout ivy and associated illumination, so that all said, in the words of another well-known poem, by John Betjeman, 'the church looks nice on Christmas Day.'

Eliot's poem ends with words that link the birth of Christ with his death - as do many Christmas carols (for instance, *The holly and the ivy*, with the pricklet, the thorn, the berry as red as any blood; or *Sing lullaby* - 'Hush, do not wake the infant King: soon comes the cross, the nails, the piercing, then in the grave at last reposing'). The Magi's gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh point forward to his sacrificial act of love, which is the true context of his birth.

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 18-25 January

Although we should always pray for the unity of Christians, a special Week of Prayer has been observed in January since 1908. Enthusiasm for it has fallen off in recent years: the quest for visible unity has come a long way since 1908, but further progress seems to have reached an impasse, not least with the Roman Catholic Church. All the more reason to pray! The Pope's visit to Britain, and the imminent departure of some Anglicans opposed to women bishops to his 'personal ordinariate' should focus our minds.

This year's prayer material has been produced by Christians in Jerusalem, our 'mother church'. A local group representing the Latin Patriarchate, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Episcopal Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek, Syrian and Armenian Orthodox Churches and the Greek Catholic Melkite Church (some of these representing the most ancient Christian communities in the world) met at the invitation of the World Council of Churches at St Christophorus Monastery in Syria.

They ask us to focus on Acts 2.42-47 which recalls us to our origins and establishes four essential pillars of church life and unity: the Word passed on by the apostles, the fellowship (*koinonia*) of believers meeting together, the breaking of the bread to celebrate Christ's new covenant, and the offering of constant prayer. As scripture makes clear, the earliest Jerusalem church lived with internal and external divisions, but persevered in this common life. Today church life in the Holy Land remains fractured, and the group has been honest about this, but they present their situation as a call to us all to strive for greater unity and justice.

There is material for reflection for each of the eight days of the Octave (which will be available in church), as well as for a Sunday service, and we shall be using this on 23 January.

For more details, see

<<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1634/week-of-prayer-2011-looks-1.html>>

and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's 'take' on the material at

<<http://www.ctbi.org.uk/511>>

St Pauls' Cathedral 300th anniversary

St Paul's will celebrate the Feast of St Paul's Conversion and the 300th anniversary of its completion with a joyful and festive Eucharist on Saturday 22 January at 12.30pm. Flyers about the event are available in church.

Schools and churches dedicated to St Paul will be taking a leading part (we hope there will be a presence from our own school) with a procession of banners and artworks inspired by Christopher Wren's 'phoenix moment'. When the stone was laid to mark the centre of the new cathedral, the one they found to use (from the previous destroyed building) had on it the word *Resurgam* – 'I will rise again'. This caught Wren's imagination, combining the resurrection hope with the idea of the cathedral rising from the flames of the Great Fire. He therefore filled the South Transept door pediment with a great stone phoenix, above the *Resurgam* text.

St Paul's want as many people as possible from across the diocese to join in celebrating both St Paul and its 300th anniversary. Young people and children will be especially welcome, and the service will be devised with them in mind. The Bishop of London will preside and preach.

Of Gods and Men

In the run-up to Christmas, some members of the congregation saw Xavier Beauvois' film *Of Gods and Men*, and found it a profoundly moving experience. It is based on the story of a group of French Cistercian monks who in 1996 were abducted from their monastery at Tibhirine in the Atlas mountains of northern Algeria and held as hostages by the GIA (Armed Islamic Group). More details can be found here:

< <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/dec/05/of-gods-and-men-film-review>>

New Step

We have offered to host a New Step course, run by the Stepney Area training team (led by Irena Edgecumbe), in the New Year, and some members of the PCC are already committed to this in principle. Irena has been in touch with other local churches, and has produced a programme of dates - starting on 17 January, so there is no time to lose! Full details are available on a flyer at church, which can also be emailed to you.

It is a six month course, with blocks of weekly sessions on Monday evenings from 7.30-9.30pm and two residential weekends. In other words, it is a significant commitment - and not one that you can opt in and out of, because then it will not work (though of course participants may need to miss sessions from time to time). The church will meet all the costs, apart from a nominal contribution from participants of about £15 for each weekend.

If we are serious about the need for nurture and growth in our faith - and we have identified this as a major priority in our parish Mission Action Plan - we should give this course our full backing. Other parishes have found it excellent and enjoyable, and a real boost both for individuals and for the church as a whole. Those who complete the course will receive a certificate from the new Bishop of Stepney (once he is in post...)

So please - sign up as soon as possible!

The Siege of Sidney Street, 2 January 1911

On 6 January at Shadwell fire station at 11am a plaque will be unveiled commemorating District Officer Charles Pearson who was involved in the Siege of Sidney Street (aka 'The Battle of Stepney') and died of his injuries on the scene of a fire. Neither Sidney Street nor Shadwell station are in our parish - the former is in St Dunstan's, the latter in St Mary's Cable Street - but it's a milestone in local history, so we'll be there. It's a story too complex to relate here, involving Latvians, communists and petty criminals, but Winston Churchill, who was Home Secretary at the time, was present, and allegedly received a bullet through his top hat. The event is jointly organised by the Jewish East End Celebration Society and Fireman Remembered, and all are welcome. Appropriately, the Revd Christine Hall, curate of St Dunstan's, has also served as a chaplain to the Fire Service, and will be leading the event.

Congregational News

We continue to remember **Olive Wagstaff**, who remains housebound - it now looks as though she may need a knee replacement. She remains cheerful, and is grateful for neighbours and friends who visit and support her in practical ways, and for the Rector's Sunday visits to include her in our celebration of the eucharist. **Rodney Sawers** is also grateful for our prayers and visits.

Michael's mother Hope Page died before Christmas in Hampshire, aged 94, well-supported by the local hospital. He and his sister (from Toronto) were able to be with her in her last days despite the many complications of the weather, and have arranged her funeral, and burial with her late husband, at South Baddesley on 7 January; she had lived there for 47 years until a recent move to a nursing home, and had been churchwarden, PCC secretary, chaired the WI and had many other community involvements. We join with the family in commending her to God, and pray for Michael and his family.

Labyrinth Project

Deborah Weston, who teaches RE at Mulberry School but also has a national role in relation to religious education, and is involved in local SACREs (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education: the statutory committees which review local authorities' provision for RE) is working on various schemes to celebrate and develop religious education in our schools. She is organising a training day here at St George-in-the-East on 28 January, which among other things will look at using prayer labyrinths - such as are found at Chartres Cathedral and elsewhere - as a pattern for prayer.