

Christward

The magazine of



January 5th–February 23rd
2014

~ From the Minister's Desk ~

As I sit here writing this piece on New Years Eve, it feels like an 'in-between' time where I am unsure whether to look backwards or forwards. Of course in many ways there is nothing special about the last day of December; the split between one group of 365 days and the next is merely a function of a mutually agreed standard of measuring time. It does however carry symbolic significance. It reminds us that time is passing, encourages us to appreciate that which is past and make the most of what is to come. Perhaps in the briefest of ways I might be able to manage a bit of both in the coming paragraphs.

Advent came and went in the seasonal flurry that always makes the theme of patient waiting a constant tension, if not an irony! Another tension that enjoyed some fruitful reflection was the idea that at a time when chronology is perhaps at its strongest, we are actually celebrating a Jesus who transcends the idea of a simple birth-life-death narrative. In all the 'fudging' that goes on in the construction of our patchwork Christmas Story, it was helpful to take seriously the opening words of John and the closing words of Matthew, as the gospels wrestle with the idea that God manifest in Jesus did not just happen for thirty-odd years, but has always happened, is happening, and will always happen – we just need to see it!

In a while, Sarah and I will be sitting down with the children to look at photographs of the year just gone. It is fast becoming a new family tradition, one that is not only a bit of fun, but also constantly surprising in the sense of rediscovering all the things we have been up to. Perhaps as the family member with the worst memory, it is more edifying for me than anyone else! Maybe you might have your own version; sitting down with friends or family or even a diary or journal, reflecting on the experiences of the past twelve months, and learning to appreciate life. Of course for most of us there will also be things we are happy to leave behind and forget about, but perhaps when seen amidst the ongoing and unfolding story of our existence, they too might find their rightful place.

As some of us have been reviewing and planning in various contexts, there seemed to be a thought emerging that we should enable more space for sharing the story of our lives with one another. We always enjoy hearing these from new members, and to an extent when we share about our jobs, so from now on there will be some second sessions devoted to personal story-telling – so please start to think about yours, and how you might bless us all as we share in it.

Another consideration for the forthcoming year is how more of our voices might be present in our Sunday mornings; not just in prayers or voiced liturgy, but in the very fabric of the services. It has been my intention since arriving to explore the idea of collaborative services. What I mean by that is one or two other people working with me to craft our worship together. So we would share thoughts on scripture, hymns and prayers – or even come up with something totally different. I would get to pass on how I do stuff, and you would inject some different skills and thoughts. If you are shy, then you needn't appear 'up the front' at all; if you have wondered if something might work, then we could experiment; if you've always been curious about the mystical art of preparing Sundays, then now is your chance to find out!

As we are now clearly beginning to look forwards, perhaps you would allow me a couple more comments before I yield the floor; one practical and one deeper in nature.

The former concerns the newly forming 'Fallowfield & Withington Food Bank. There will be a more detailed update published shortly, but for now let me briefly mention the progress made. Since Union Chapel agreed to lend its 'institutional structure' to the Food Bank on a temporary basis, we have been able to open a separate bank account through which funds can be managed. It has also allowed the formal application to the Trussell Trust to go ahead, and on receipt of our formal membership it will be all systems go!

I am also thrilled to announce that three other churches have so far agreed to help fund the project initially; St Cuthbert's, St Paul's, and St Chad's have contributed £1,000 in total to help get things moving. This will not be the end of the financial support required

and we continue to seek support, not least from any individuals who would like to contribute – and who can now easily do so by writing cheques to ‘F&W Food Bank’!

The coming year will also be a significant one for Dr David Goodbourn. Some of you will know David, and some for far longer than I have. He has been the General Secretary of Churches in Britain and Ireland, but I know him (a little) as a worshipper at Chorlton Central and as the President of Luther King House during my training (he retired as I left).

In fact, David ‘book-ended’ my theological education. He taught my very first module on Theological Reflection when I thought very differently about God than I do now! He was also a contributor to my last modules on Theological Education four years later, as well as a gentle voice of wisdom in between. That voice remains so worthwhile to hear, and therefore I am very pleased that Alan managed to arrange to print a copy of David’s recent reflections on his terminal illness. It seems to me incredibly honest and realistic, and yet hopeful and gracious. It might not be easy reading, but at this time when we naturally consider our past and futures, the preciousness of time as a product of our inescapable mortality; it may provide a helpful perspective for our own journeys and an insight into the God who travels with us.

~ Sod’s Law, not God’s Law ~

Be careful what you preach! It was the first Sunday in Lent this year, and I spoke about entering the wilderness with Jesus. There, I said, we have nowhere to hide. We have to face up to our own mortality, and strip away the myths we develop to present our chosen face to ourselves and to the world and ask who we really are.

Two weeks later I was in hospital, absorbing the news that there was a 50% chance I would be dead within six months, and having busily to cancel all the activities that buttressed my own chosen identity. Three months and an unsuccessful major operation later, I

now knew I was terminally ill. I have a life expectancy, even with good palliative care, of less than a year. I'm in God's waiting room, and moving steadily closer to the door.

My Lenten sermon had said that, when everything else was stripped away, one thing remained: we are people who are loved. My experience confirms that message. And for me, God's love has often been mediated through the love of others: my wife Lynn, who with Aberdonian toughness fights my corner; my children; my friends and colleagues. I have been overwhelmed by the scores of people who with carefully chosen words have written to me or visited.

It is the response of these folk that has led to the reflections I want to share here. Some clearly found it difficult to talk to me, feeling they ought to have words to say but not knowing what they were. Most identified things they had appreciated about me, carefully ignoring my faults and the ways I had driven them up the wall! If Vespasian on his death bed quipped: "Oh dear, I think I'm becoming a god", reading these messages made me respond: "Oh dear, I think I'm becoming a saint." But reassurance that I and my work had been valued really made a difference, and I'm truly grateful.

Three theological issues were raised by the messages I received: First, some suggested it was somehow not fair that I should die 15 years before the average life expectancy of a man of my age and background. They felt God owed me a long retirement, or were kind enough to suggest that God was scoring an own goal by taking me away too soon. These are feelings I don't share. Stuff happens, often randomly. I am, of course, deeply disappointed to be leaving life sooner than envisaged. I have young grandchildren, and I wanted to see them grow up. I have a wife, and we wanted to explore the world together. But my illness is simply the luck of the draw. It's Sod's Law, not God's Law. I don't believe God willed it. What God wills is that, faced with it, I should use it with God's help to spin meaning, creativity and love.

Second, most said they were praying for me. What are we looking for when we say that? I know someone who died of cancer at my age. She believed that, if she had enough faith she would be cured, and died feeling guilty because of her lack of faith. The view of prayer she had been taught creates misery rather than hope. I don't expect prayer to cure me; the cancer will take its natural course. But I do believe in the connectedness of all things, since it is in the one God that we live and move and have our being. Mind and body are connected. Mind and mind are connected – I am who I am only in relationship with others. So another person's prayer may help me be stronger to face my illness, and more fully alive in the time left to me.

Third, a few spoke of my future in heaven. It is interesting how seldom one hears sermons about what happens after death, and strange how even those who have a clear belief in paradise seldom seem in a hurry to get there.

My problem is that, although I hear in the Christian tradition a clear invitation to believe in a life to come, I do not find it possible in any conventional sense. I'm cheered by the knowledge that most of the Bible was written by people who also had no belief in it. The sheol of the Hebrew Scriptures was not a place of conscious existence; it involved a kind of shadow of the person. Most of the New Testament writers most of the time held that the dead were dead; God could recreate them in a resurrection at the last day, but until then they had no conscious existence. Only the Johannine writings and the later Paul moved consistently beyond that to insist that resurrection began here and now, and so continued after death. I rejoice in the here-and-now resurrection, but cannot share the picture of a life that continues beyond the grave. Like most of these biblical writers, I don't understand myself as having a body, I am a body. When the body goes, I go.

This does not mean that life is thrown away and lost forever. Because I understand God as the deeply personal environment in which all space and time exist, every moment is "now" to God. To the God of eternity, my childhood is "now", my adulthood is "now", my death is "now". Outside time, God's relationship with me simply

is. I used to be attracted to the idea of life as a vale of soul-making, a kind of adventure training ground where we grew and developed as persons over time, but that idea cannot cope with dementia, or with the simple fact that most of us were in our prime – physically, mentally, spiritually, ethically – in the midst of life, not at the end of it. But to see the whole of my life as “now” to God means God in eternity knows me always at my best as well as at my worst. This is reflected in one of the hymns I have chosen for my funeral, Colin Gibson’s beautiful “Nothing is lost on the breath of God.” In God’s project for time-and-space, my life has its part.

But if God from outside time knows me eternally, I as a creature of time experience life as having a beginning and an end. Just as I had no existence in time before 1948, so I have no existence in time after my death. Some may reply that in the afterlife we are outside time and space, but if so this is no longer human existence in any real sense. To be human is to exist in time, to have a narrative, to live in a world of consequences. Without that, the discontinuity with my earthly life is too great for me to still be me. We find the idea of non-existence difficult. Many cultures posit a pre-existence in a process of reincarnation, and most of us as children imagined ourselves as having existed somewhere waiting to be allocated to a family (I used to pride myself on having chosen well). To imagine our non-existence after death is even more difficult. The title of Damien Hirst’s shark-in-formaldehyde, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, captures that nicely. If I try to imagine non-existence, somehow I always end up seeing a shadow of myself in the picture, consciously observing and experiencing my own oblivion! But finding an idea difficult doesn’t make it untrue. If I’m wrong, and find myself after death confronted by a chorus of more orthodox friends singing: “I told you so,” I will, I think, be delighted. But I don’t expect it.

I’m living now in a strange time. I don’t feel or look ill any longer, yet the cancer that will kill me is busily growing. I don’t feel I am engaged in a “battle” with it, despite the cliché that always accompanies the news of another death. It is more a kind of

peaceful coexistence; we are dancing awkwardly together, and the end of the dance will be the death of us both. It has brought pluses as well as minuses. In weakening the mechanisms I have erected to keep my emotions in check, it has enabled me to feel them as never before. That's true whether it is love for my wife and family or for my God; I often now find the words of hymns hitting home afresh and reducing me to tears. Moreover, a period to prepare for death has been a gift both to me and my family that the victims of sudden death are denied. And my fear of long years fading away with dementia has been removed. I can't yet celebrate with St Francis "thou most kind and gentle death", but at least the grim reaper is growing a little less grim.

David Goodbourn

(This article was originally published in the October 2013 edition of Reform.)

~ Nativity Play ~

Brava! Brava! Junior Church's 'Nativity' a critical triumph.

Our Drama Critic, **Rachel Garner**, reports on a new production of one of the best loved stories of all time.

The theatrical talent that has come out of the Union Chapel Junior Church group in recent years has been magnificent and so it was with great interest and excitement that I attended this year's nativity play...

The nativity play presents even the most talented of directors with a challenge- how to engage the audience with a tale that is so familiar and well loved- and this was a challenge that Alan Redhouse and his team of producers and actors met with great gusto.

The minimal staging was superb- the hand written placards that announced the changes of scene gave the piece a Brechtian feel which made its audience question- what is the Christmas story all about? What does it mean to us? The choice of name for the Inn 'The Horse's Head' recalled the brilliance of Mario Puzo's



masterpiece The Godfather and was a timely foreshadowing to the slaughter of the innocents as committed by Herod.

Herod, in this production, was no mere pantomime villain - there was a spine chilling and convincing growl that came from the King played by Nathan Geere.



The casting was an inspired choice- choosing a Herod short of stature suggested a link between Herod and Napoleon Bonaparte- the would be emperor of the World.

The Angel as played by Jessica Howes was ethereal and calm-



such as would reassure the most frightened and distressed shepherds and the audience could easily imagine the angelic singing that would be produced by such a voice.

Isobel Earnshaw in the role of one of the Kings showed great comic timing in her performance. The eternal cry of 'Are we there yet?' resonated with everyone who has ever endured a car journey with



young children. The request for a map at Herod's palace had the audience laughing in the aisles.

Anna Geere, in the role of Mary, beautifully expressed the frustration and annoyance that really can only be produced by travelling over 100 miles on a Donkey whilst 9 months pregnant and arriving in the city only to find that your husband has not managed



to complete the one simple task you asked of him- to book a room ahead.

We hope that Anna will reprise the role of Mary in the story where Jesus runs away and teaches in the temple- we can only imagine the scolding that he would receive...

The overall production was wonderful with Lorna Richardson and Sarah Geere involved in the costume design and production as well as backstage management and props. The appearance of the star as the Kings were desperately searching the sky included the audience in that feeling of uncertainty and searching not knowing whether the star would appear or not.

The epilogue to the piece encouraged the audience to reflect on what they had seen although it offered no certain answers it did prompt us to think what is it about this familiar and well-loved tale that continues to speak to us after so many years.



Brava! Brava! Was the cry that came from the audience- many congratulations to the cast. I am looking forward to Easter with great anticipation...

Rachel Garner

**~ Minutes of the Church Meeting
of Union Chapel Fallowfield (Baptist)
held on Sunday 17th November 2013
at 11.20am.~**

Present: Ian Geere (chair), Gwyneth Heritage Roberts, Beryl Dykes, Irene Roberts, Ted Land, Eileen Land, Steve Roberts, Harry Fleming, Rachel Scott, Owen Jones, J'Andrea Hood, Hilda Linton, Colin Marchbank-Smith, Rose Bell, Margaret Edmonds, Andy Howes, Margaret Redhouse, Nicola Hamilton

Apologies: Gwen Mattock, Margaret Garner, Alan Redhouse and Michael Welford (with children)

The Minutes of the September 2013 Meeting (in current magazine) were approved.

Notification of AOB: Large Hall Gutters

Matters arising/updates/information: Christmas arrangements are in the current information sheet. Volunteers will be needed to distribute cards to the Sherwood St estate when these are received from the printers. An announcement will be made at an appropriate time.

Further discussion of Epilogue postponed until January.

Minister's stipend: Full details of this discussion and recommendations can be obtained from the Secretary on request.

Food Bank: We are hoping that at least 5 local churches will join in and there are a number of interested individuals some of whom are willing to contribute financially. The specifics are still to be worked out, including the location, but to get the ball rolling there are 3 points to address:

- (i) We need to put in £350 as Union Chapel's start-up contribution
- (ii) The Food Bank will become a separate charitable entity in due course but in the first instance it needs to come under the umbrella of another organisation. Are we happy for Union Chapel to be that organisation, and for some of the Church Trustees to become the initial trustees of the Food Bank?
- (iii) Is it OK for the Church to set up a separate bank account for the Food Bank?

- (iv) After some discussion all the above points were agreed.
Further agreed to make a payment of £150 as an initial “float” for the project.

We are grateful to Nicola for being willing to take on the additional work that this will entail for the Treasurer.

10% donations made by the Church out of general income:

following on from the September meeting, it was proposed that we make donations now of the difference between our actual giving in 2012 and what we should have given based on 10% of general income for that year, divided roughly pro rata between the previous recipients on the same percentage basis, and that we make the 10% donations for 2013 to the same organisations and in the same split.

After some discussion this was approved, but with the qualification that before making payments for 2014 we should review BMS World Mission and Greater Manchester Industrial Mission with a view to reconsidering the recipients of our donations. There was some unease about the projects being undertaken by BMS and the way they are going about things.

Everyone was happy to give to Home Mission, Northern Baptist Learning Community and Christian Aid.

Notification of Deacons’ Agenda rotating topics for December and January:

December – review of pastoral work and supporting the minister;

January – midweek activities, plans for Spring and Easter, Church Weekend 2014, and advance consideration of activities in May and August (historically low attendance times)

Any Other Business: The Large Hall gutters overflow every time it rains. Fabric Committee authorised to spend £1,500 out of the Fabric budget on replacement gutters.

The Meeting closed with a sung Epilogue at 11.53am

~ News of the Family ~

We wish **Owen Jones** well with the purchase of his new house.

As **Hannah, Phil and Sam** move into their new house in Sheffield we send them our greetings for a Happy New Year.

Anne Phillips returned to Manchester recently to have minor surgery on her hand. We wish her a speedy recovery.

It was good to see so many friends returning to Union Chapel over the Christmas break. Our small band of musicians almost tripled in size for the Carol Service.

~ The Crisis in South Sudan ~ from the Christian Aid Website

An estimated 62,000 civilians have been displaced in South Sudan amid escalating violence, with five out of 10 states affected. 42,000 people have taken refuge in UN compounds across the country, with 15,000 in Jonglei state to the east of the country, where the threat of conflict remains high. At least 500 people are believed to have died in the past week.

Political tensions have been building for many months in South Sudan since President Salva Kiir – leader of the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM) - dismissed the entire cabinet in July this year. On 16 December, President Kiir accused his ex-deputy Riek Machar of a failed coup and there has since been an increase in the number of reports of human rights abuses and violence, especially in Juba, Unity and Jonglei states. There have also been recent reports of heightened tensions in other states.

As the humanitarian situation deteriorates, there are growing fears that the violence will continue to become more widespread and have a lasting impact on the future of South Sudan as a whole.

Complex political and ethnic divisions

Political dynamics are at the heart of the conflict. However escalation along ethnic divisions raises profound concerns around

the protection of civilians. President Kiir comes from the majority Dinka tribal group whereas Mr Machar comes from the Nuer community. The Dinkas and the Nuers are the largest of more than 200 ethnic groups in South Sudan.

‘Human rights violations must be avoided at all costs, particularly the targeting of specific communities and potential retaliation attacks between ethnic groups,’ says Amos Nderi, Christian Aid’s South Sudan country manager.

‘The complex political and ethnic divisions that exist can only be resolved through long-term dialogue and reconciliation work. We need the UK Government to support a democratically functioning South Sudan state in the longer term by using their influence to encourage respect for human rights, good governance, democracy and active civil society.’

A call for peace

In an open letter from the South Sudan Council of Churches this week, religious leaders, including Archbishop Daniel Deng who is chairman of the Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation (CNHPR), called for calm. *‘There is a political problem between leaders within the SPLM [but] this should not be turned into an ethnic problem. Sadly, on the ground it is developing into tribalism. This must be diffused urgently before it spreads.’*

‘Reconciliation is needed between the political leaders. Violence is not an acceptable way of resolving disputes. The way this incident is handled will have an effect on the future of our nation, whether positive or negative, both internally and in terms of international relations.’

Christian Aid’s response

Christian Aid is watching the situation very carefully and is deeply concerned about the humanitarian impact that the recent violence is having on civilians.

We are in contact with our South Sudanese partners and are discussing how best to respond to those in need.

In the meantime we call on all those involved in the violence to respect international laws and to allow humanitarian access to ensure that aid reaches the people who need it most.

~ Talking to Each Other ~

If you would like to comment on any of the articles in this magazine and so start a discussion or if you would care to write an article for us on a topic of your choosing such contributions would be welcome. Please send them by email to alan.redhouse@virgin.net or by post to The Editor, Christward, Union Chapel Fallowfield, 2b Wellington Road, Fallowfield, Manchester, M14 6EQ.

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