

FROM THE MANSE...

Advent 2020

Well, 2020 is almost over and done, and some of you might be thinking not soon enough! It's been a very challenging year. There's no denying that the impact of COVID-19 has made on every person, every family, every household. We have been kept apart from loved ones. We have lost family and friends. We have had plans destroyed and been locked down (twice!). Some have lost employment or been furloughed, while others have been overwhelmed with work. But at last there are hints (and more than hints) of a way through as three different approaches to a vaccine are showing promise of becoming a reality.

But before we rush to the New Year, just think about what we have done over the year. In these unprecedented times we have done things that we would never have expected of ourselves. If, when I first came to North Warwickshire two years ago any one had said that we would be gathering together over the internet for Sunday worship I would have never believed them, and yet this is what we have been doing for eight months or so now. (I know that many are joining over the phone, but the key part of the process take place on the internet!). You didn't know you had it in you, did you? We recently tried our first Zoom Messy Church from Old Meeting – a 'light party' on 31st October – which was great success and we're planning a Zoom Christingle Service.

It's not only been our worship that has moved online. We've had meetings on Zoom (oh, so many meetings!) even a Zoom Synod, and seminars and conferences. There's coffee after church and other social events (for example we've tried Zoom Bingo and Zoom Coffee Mornings). We have (at least in three of our churches) been able to hold some in-person worship, which I know has been especially welcome for those who have not been able to access Zoom. This involved a great deal of work from the initial COVID risk assessments, to sourcing, buying and putting in place in the necessary supplies for hand-sanitizing, signage and so on. It's been a real sadness that a problem with the building in Atherstone has meant that we weren't able to have in-person services at Trinity before the second lockdown.

In many ways this points to the unseen work that has gone on through the year. Not just those who have been maintaining our buildings (and there have been particular issues with buildings that aren't being used as normal), but in so many different ways to keep things going. I want to express my deep thanks to the Elders of Old Meeting and Nuneaton URCs, the Leaders Council at Trinity and the Church Council at Horeston Grange for their support, wisdom and encouragement, and particularly to my Church Secretaries – Ann, Pam, Lynda, Mary and Diana – who do so much work that is too often overlooked.

Over the months we have had to drawn on skills we didn't realise we had. Some of these skills are new, some half-forgotten. Some discovered that they can handle technology better than they thought, others have rediscovered skills in sewing to make masks and scrubs for those on the frontline. I know that putting together worship for Sundays now is not how I was used to doing it in January. Each week I put together music tracks as backing for Fiona and me to lead the singing. I will freely admit that I am not a musician, and I now more than ever appreciate the gifts that Helen, Ian and Ruth were bringing each week as our organists. But I do appreciate how much I have learned and discovered through doing this.

By the time we get to Christmas it will be nine months since the start of the first lockdown - does that period of time strike you as significant? It is the length of time that Mary carried the Christ-child within her. Perhaps there is something within that God wants to bring out of us in the New Year. After all the message of Christmas is in the hope of God with us, and we should reflect that God has been with us through the last nine months – in the help offered to neighbours, in the calls to check on how we are doing, in the food donated to food banks and the scrubs sewn for health and social care workers. God has been with us and has more wonders in store. There are things we need to learn from our experience and take forward – one example is how our Zoom services have allowed the housebound to join with us in worship every Sunday.

It will certainly be different this year – we won't have the carol services we've been used to over the years, nor will our family gatherings be the same. But the truth behind Christmas is unchanged, God coming among us in Jesus his Son to offer us hope.

So how will we celebrate? Looking at what we can do in-person, it may be limited but there are other things we can do.

On the 13th December at 7pm there will be a Nuneaton Churches Carol Service (broadcast by Anker Radio on 1386kHz AM and at <https://www.ankerradio.co.uk/> with a video stream on YouTube (details to be confirmed).

On the 21st December we are invited to sing 'Carols on the Doorstep' at 8pm - <https://www.doorstepcarols.com> . There are a number of dates being suggested, so why this one? The 21st is the longest/darkest night of the year, when better to bring some light! The website will stream music but the carols are well known (O come all ye faithful/Away in a manger/ Silent night/Joy to the world/We wish you a merry Christmas) so you probably know them well enough to sing anyway!

Then there will be the Pastorate Carol Service on 24th December. This will go live on YouTube (details to be confirmed) and our phone-in service (on the Sunday catch-up number: 01827 211137) at 6pm – invite family, friends & neighbours to join us (it will include our first attempt at a virtual choir).

And, of course, there will be 'Christmas Morning at the Manse' – meeting on our usual Sunday Zoom numbers at 9.30am for a short time of worship as we unwrap the message of Christmas morning. Please feel free to be wearing your favourite Christmas jumper/hat or other festive finery.

It's going to be different (and there will be other things to watch out for in each of the churches in the Pastorate) but it will still be a chance to celebrate the greatest gift of all. May God bless us this Christmas, may each one of us know the Saviour's presence in our lives and the Holy Spirit fill us with new life.

Allan.