

**Christmas Day,
Friday, 25th December 2020**



Dear Friends,

'For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given.'

(Isaiah 9:2)

Today we celebrate the joy of Christmas Day! As the weeks have passed, the growing light of the Advent Wreath has become a symbol of Christ who shatters the darkness of sin and death. Each week as the light has grown stronger, we have also grown stronger in our reverence for and commitment to Christ.

We lit our first Candle, remembering the Patriarchs and we spoke of hope - because God keeps his promises to us. The second Candle commemorated the Prophets who foretold the coming of Jesus as the Prince of Peace - who would call his children to work for peace in his name. In the third week of Advent, our Candle pointed to John the Baptist, the vanguard of Jesus. This Candle also points the way to love - because Jesus gave everything for us and led us to know the forgiveness of God. Through our fourth Candle, we share the joy of Mary, the mother of God, and we rejoice because the Holy Spirit fills our hearts and minds with the presence of God

Now, on Christmas Morning we light the central wreath Candle as we rejoice and praise God for the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: God with us in the tumult of our lives.

Prayer for Christmas Day – The Birth of Christ

As the prophets promised so long ago, you have come to us once again;
and with the shepherds, we are filled with wonder and amazement.

Lord Jesus, you come as a tiny, fragile baby;
yet we know that you are God and you are with us.

May the flame of this candle remind us that you are the light of the world
and that if we follow you, we will never walk in darkness,
but will have the true light of life.

Amen.

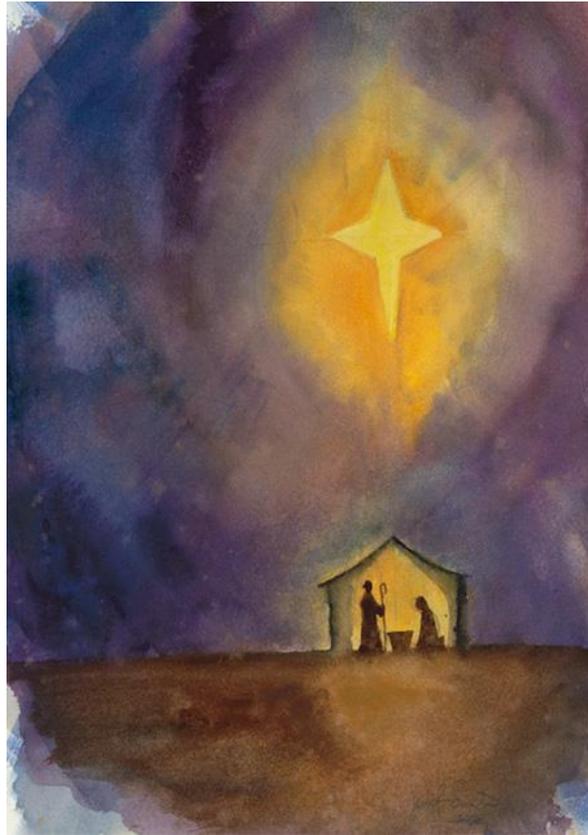


GCI image taken from Ball State University Planetarium, Indiana

Many of you will have been following the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn in the western night sky at dusk over the past few nights. Hailed as 'The Great Conjunction,' this moment of the two bright planets of Jupiter and Saturn as they start to form a double planet, has fuelled conjecture in the astronomical world as to whether such a celestial event could account for the 'Star of Wonder' which was recorded in the night sky over Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth. So far this week, I haven't been able to see anything because of the rain Have any of you been able to discern this wondrous event? I'm hoping Christmas Eve might give us clearer night skies!

What's fascinating about all this conjecture is that our so-called 'secular' society seems to have absorbed the wonder and might of the Christmas Star, with people who do not usually confess the name of Christ expressing a desire for this phenomenon to explain the presence of a guiding star, which lit the Stable, proclaimed the arrival of God-with-us, mesmerised the Shepherds and illumined the path of the Wise Men on their journey to worship the true Light of the World which had come to us in Jesus Christ. In the current pandemic, with new variants of Coronavirus emerging with worrying rapidity, is it any wonder that folks are searching beyond the gift of their own abilities to find solace and comfort, justice and peace!

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep,
The silent stars go by.
Yet in the dark street shineth,
The everlasting Light.
The hopes and fears of all the years.
Are met in thee tonight.

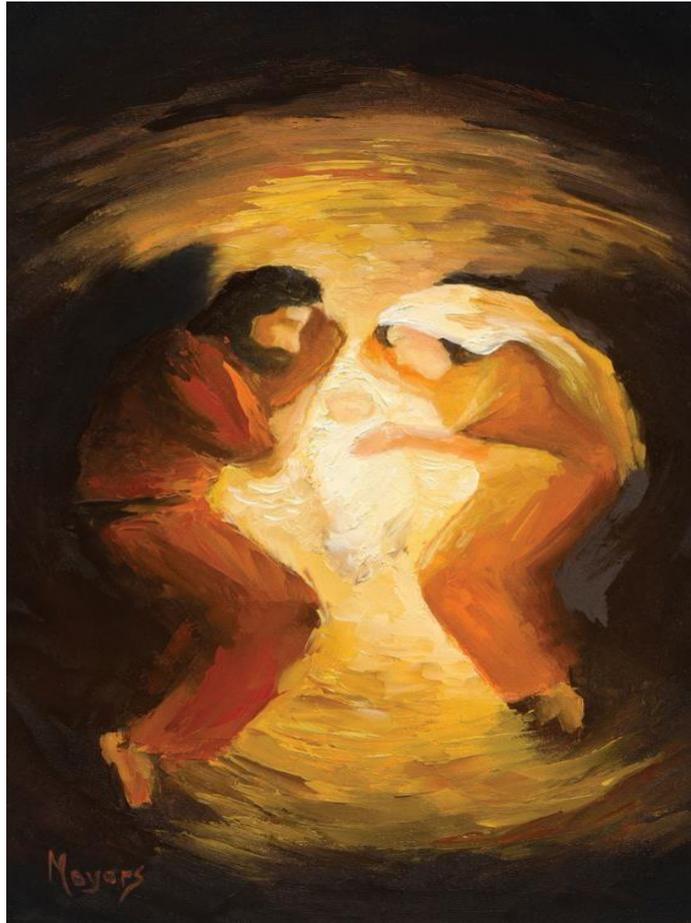


'Nativity' by Jennifer Smith Greene

The classic Christmas Carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, encapsulates so poetically the needs and hopes, not only of our own time, but of generations of people, desperate for the light of mercy, social justice and peace to shine upon their complicated lives. The pen of Charles Dickens has also spoken truth to power, so often illustrating the political and economic inequalities of his era through the imaginative yet illustrative narratives of his art.

As 2020 draws to a close, it is the bright light of Dickens which, along with the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, has caught the zeitgeist of the moment, with productions of *A Christmas Carol* in cities across the globe receiving much critical acclaim. On the 150th anniversary of his death, parallels are being drawn between our current times and the world into which Dickens shone a light. First published in December 1843, Dickens' based his vision of Christmas-time on expressions of joy, compassion, companionship and redemption, through the tale of a grouchy old businessman, haunted by past misdeeds and anxious about the future - with characters, familiar to us from our childhoods - such as Tiny Tim, Jacob Marley, Bob Cratchit and of course, Ebenezer Scrooge.

Written in Victorian England, *A Christmas Carol* speaks into the amendment of the Poor Law Act, which saw an expansion of Workhouses and expulsions to Australia of those '*destitutes*' who were held culpable for the precarious poverty of their economic and social predicament. As shocking as their plight might feel to us today, in 2020 we too have countless numbers of homeless people on our streets as a result of economic hardship, and The Evening Standard of 10th December 2020 reports '*middle class graduates joining queues at foodbanks as the hunger crisis deepens in the pandemic.*'



'The Manger' by Mike Moyers

In the Victorian era, Dickens re-established Christmas as the season of goodwill to all. *A Christmas Carol* became a new expression of the Gospel, engendering a social conscience in his readers and encouraging people to respond to others in need with a generous spirit. Although the story is based around the old man, Scrooge, who approaches the twilight of his life, Dickens rekindles the spirit of childhood innocence and joy which jaded older people, exhausted by the trials of life, have lost. *A Christmas Carol* holds out hope that people can be changed, that you and I can be different. Could this be why we never tire of it?

Journeying with Scrooge as he visits the three ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Future, we are guided to reconnect with our inner child, symbolized by the Christ-child, whose birth is the source, both of this holy night and of our eternal salvation.

Using the mechanism of the Ghost of Christmas Past, Dickens beautifully communicates the mess we make of our lives: the dulling effect which everyday life has on our ability to see both the true blessings of our lives; and how our expectations and sense of entitlement for our personal betterment inure us to the inequalities of our world and the desperate suffering and needs of others.



Alastair Sim as Scrooge and Francis de Wolff as The Ghost of Christmas Present - 1951 source: projectfandom.com

Through the Ghost of Christmas Present, Scrooge is able to observe the home of Bob Cratchit, and the desperate reality of his impoverished life. Metaphorically walking a mile in the shoes of another soul, Scrooge's eyes are opened to the truth that Cratchit's son, Tiny Tim is a very sick little boy in need of medical attention which his family cannot afford to give. Scrooge is confronted with the fact that he is one of the richest men in the town and that people all around him are in need of what he has. The ghost of his dead business partner, Jacob Marley, now consigned to the ravages of hell, ruefully admits to Scrooge that *'the welfare of people should indeed have been our business.'* A biting metaphor for our own time.

Perhaps, just as some of us have needed the jolt of Coronavirus to make us aware of the blessings of our lives, Scrooge needed the Ghost of Christmas Present to show him how blessed his existence was, and how needy those around him were – and he was also shown how he was perceived by others. We too need to see that there are people all around us like Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim – the oppressed, the marginalised and the poor; that we, in Scrooge like fashion, continue to overlook in the busy-ness of our own lives. In Jacob Marley's words: *'The welfare of people should be our business indeed!'*

Through the Ghost of Christmas Future, we are given a glimpse of the absolute death we are set to inherit if we live our lives as Scrooge has done, in selfish disabuse of our world and its people. Through Scrooge's eventual redemption from his old and selfish, sinful ways, we are given a vision of the irrepressible JOY we too are able to experience when we truly realise the impoverished existence from which we have been rescued by the eternal riches of Christ.



'Holy Family Nativity' by Heidi Malott

After his spiritual visitations, Scrooge can't contain himself. He literally dances in the streets and spreads Christmas cheer where ever he goes. He sets wrongs right – he seizes what he thought were lost opportunities – he shares with ridiculous abandon. He can't help himself – he's like a child at Christmas – exuberant. He's been saved from himself and his terrible fate!



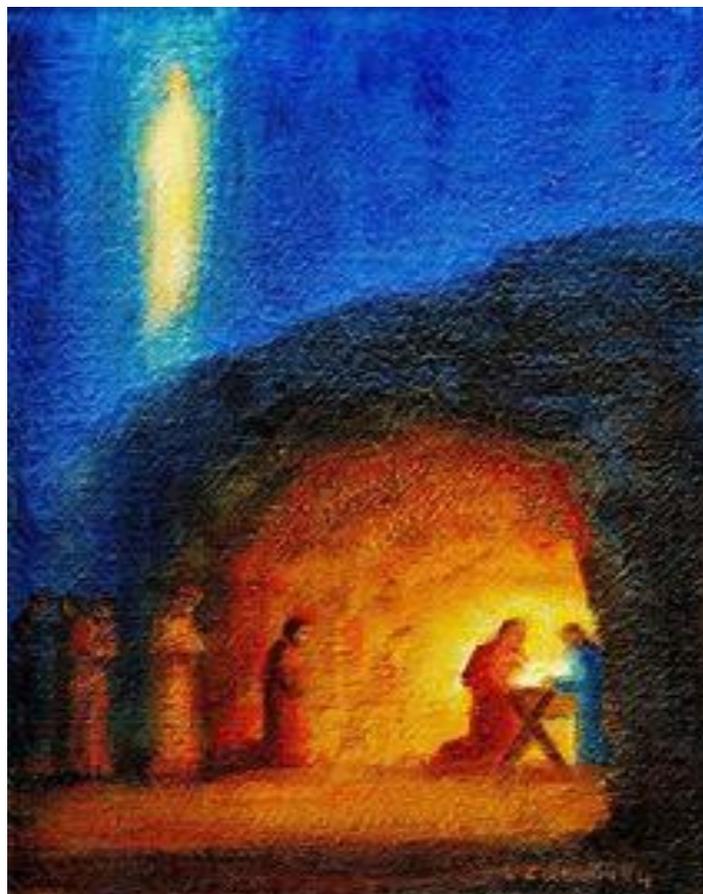
Source – Disney 2009

We too are, each of us, vulnerable to goodness. We stand open to the challenge of the simpler life. We know, in our wiser moments, that there is no direct correlation between wealth and happiness. Frequently, as has been the case in this past year, we are stung into an awareness of our poverty by noticing how rich others' spiritual lives, though materially impoverished, can be.

The reality of Scrooge's salvation caused him to take on all kinds of things that were not a part of his personality, gifting or station in life. But he couldn't help it! To me that's the beauty of this story – the complete change in the man.

The book says it this way:

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.



'The Nativity' by Ladislav Záborský

My prayer for us all this Christmas is that we might each rekindle the joy of Christ which would bubble out of us so that others might see how we have kept the spirit of Christmas in our hearts all our lives: that we *were 'as good a friend, neighbour, and person as anyone in the whole world.'* And that, when anybody laughed at us for the child-like joy we shone out in our lives – we would rejoice in the transformative love of the Christ-child at work in our hearts.

In the redemptive joy of Christmas, let us close with a blessing that comes straight from Dickens' pen and guides us to seek spiritual transformation as much as we must offer to help as transformative agents in the lives of others – *'God bless us, every one!'*

Yours, rejoicing in the birth of Christ,

Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice



'Christmas' - Artist Unknown

A Christmas Blessing

God, who reigns over all the world with mercy and justice,
direct your ways and keep you safe this Christmas time.
Amen.

Schedule of Services

(All services begin at **10am** unless indicated otherwise)

Date	Service	Chilbolton	Crawley	Littleton	Sparsholt	Wherwell
24 Dec	<i>Christmas Eve</i>	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed
25 Dec	<i>Christmas Day</i>	Family Christmas Service Cancelled	Family Christmas Service Cancelled	Family Christmas Communion	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Service Cancelled
27 Dec	<i>St Stephen's</i>	Closed	Closed	Closed	Patronal Holy Communion Cancelled	Closed

STOP PRESS!!!

Because of huge logistic difficulties in managing the many regulations pertaining to Coronavirus and social distancing, together with the imperative to honour and support the health and family shielding needs of those who volunteer to serve your community in opening and staffing our parish churches, it has been necessary to cancel our planned services for Christmas at St Mary the Less, Chilbolton; St Mary's, Crawley and St Peter and Holy Cross, Wherwell.

Whilst I am naturally saddened to have to make this decision, especially at Christmas, the risk to the health and wellbeing of my parishioners is far more important to me than any desire for us to gather. Because of the staffing capacity at St Catherine's, Littleton and at St Stephen's, Sparsholt, we will be able to hold restricted services, as planned. However, the planned Patronal Festival at St Stephen's, Sparsholt, on Sunday, 27th December has also needed to be cancelled.

For these same reasons, even the Christmas Eve Carol Service from Kings College, Cambridge has been cancelled this year. At 3pm on Radio 4, we will be listening to a recording of a rehearsal made earlier in the year.

Whilst I can appreciate that you will each be disappointed, I am most grateful for the many messages I have received in support of my decision. This comes with my thanks, both to the many people who help to run our churches and to all our parishioners. I look forward to joining with you in worship when it is safe and prudent to do so. Meanwhile, God is with you in the details of your lives, closer than you can imagine.

Each week I issue a Benefice Newsletter. If you are not already receiving it by email or from the Downs Benefice Website, please contact my Administrator, Caroline McAulay on (09162) 880845 or on office@downsbenefice.org.uk

Meanwhile, I have issued a **recorded Christmas Holy Communion Service** which you will find on our Benefice website at: <http://downsbenefice.org/> My thanks to all who have contributed to this, particularly the children of Sparsholt and Wherwell Primary Schools, and Lydia Coram for her solo of Once in Royal David's City.

Revd Jax Machin



Collect Prayer for Christmas Day

Lord Jesus Christ,
Your birth at Bethlehem
draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth:
Accept our heartfelt praise
as we worship you,
our Saviour and our eternal God.
Amen.



John 1:1-14 - The Word Became Flesh

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.