

December 2023



50p

Life



swcd-churches.org.uk



Editorial Notes

LIFE MAGAZINE EDITOR



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Articles for the January edition are due Sunday 10th December

Thank you to the contributors of some lovely photographs for this Christmas edition of Life. On the back we have our Rector Ana and our Curate Rachel parading to Merriman park for the Remembrance Service, Ana is also in the group at the Elmhurst School Remembrance service. On page 22/23 Bernard shares some news from Zimbabwe, and a picture on the back shows some of our young homeless friends in the street. The poppy display is a Walton one, and a short report can be read on page 8. Gill Williams of Compton Dundon and Alex Pengelly (our curate's son) at the recent Confirmation Service at Wells Cathedral completes the back cover pictures.

When Ian Jones (Mission Church) returned from a holiday in France he brought back the Nativity Figures that are featured on the front cover and you can read all about it on pages 24\25. This 28 page edition of Life is packed with interesting articles so I do hope you will find time to read it from cover to cover during this busy month. When the distributors collect the money for next year's magazines the cost remains at £5 for the year, and single copies are 50p.

WISHING YOU ALL A VERY HAPPY
CHRISTMAS. Roger



Rector's Letter

“The shepherds went back, singing praises to God for all they had heard and seen...” Luke chapter 2 verse 20.

Dear Friends,

One of the many things I love about Christmas is the singing and playing of familiar Christmas carols. As a musician, for many years, I played at Christmas carol services as part of a church orchestra and at the time was far more familiar with the music and harmonies than the words themselves. But the words of the carols indeed tell the story of the wonder of that first Christmas, when shepherds were out in the fields finding the night sky filled with the angels singing God's praises because of the star pointing to Jesus, God, Immanuel, who had been born in a stable in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph.

By the end of the Christmas season, I will have sung many carols, I am sure more than once, whether in school carol services, nursing homes, church services, Crib services, carol singing, Midnight communion or elsewhere.

I am really excited that this year, the Church of England's Christmas campaign is 'Follow the star – join the Song'. I want to join the song, telling the story and living the story of Jesus. I hope that you are also able to do this, whether you are at home unable to join us in person or whether you come along to some of the services we are offering as a benefice. Christmas is also a great time to bring others to join in the song: friends, neighbours, family members.

The danger of the old familiar carols is, of course that they become all too familiar. Many of us (without revealing our ages) have heard the Christmas story told and retold in story and song

over many decades. Yet my prayer for us all this year is that we can recapture the wonder and awe that we glimpse in the shepherds as they heard for the first time the wondrous story sung by the angels.

It's a sad reality, that for increasing numbers in our communities the Christmas story is no longer familiar. For those for whom Christmas is little more than eating, drinking, bad TV and long holidays, can we invite them to 'follow the star, join the song' this year?

With my love and prayers to you and yours this Christmas season,

Ana

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Celebrating Christmas with our local Schools

In mid-December, we will be welcoming all pupils from Elmhurst Junior School in Street for their annual carol services in the Parish Church. Please do pray for these services which run from Monday 11th – Thursday 14th December.

In addition, the Open the Book team will be bringing the Christmas story to all our primary schools and I will also be taking Christmas assemblies across the benefice.

Ana Lawrence

Communion at Christmas We have a wonderful team of church members who take communion to people at home who are unable to get to church. If you or someone you know would value

home communion over the Christmas period, please contact the church office. Thank you. Ana Lawrence

CHURCH FINANCES - HELP US TO END THE YEAR ON A 'POSITIVE' NOTE

Over the year we have sought to keep you up to date with news on our church finances and, as the year comes to an end, there is much to celebrate, as well as ongoing challenges.

Giving has increased across the benefice and we are deeply grateful to those who have reviewed and increased their regular financial support for SWCD Churches. However, costs have also risen for churches as they have for individuals and the fact remains that, as it stands, our churches are likely to end the year with an overall deficit, spending more than their income.

But this does not have to be the case. This December, why not help us to end our financial year on a positive note by making a one-off gift to your church to help us balance the books or even end the year with a surplus?

Here are a few suggestions that may help:

Maybe, having checked, you have not given all that you had intended to give to the church this year, perhaps because you have missed some services or for some other reason? There is still time to put that right.

Maybe you have received money that, if you are honest, you do not really need, be that a Government Winter Fuel Allowance, work Christmas bonus, tax rebate, or something else? Heating and other costs have risen for our churches but, as churches

don't generally receive such payments, why not donate some or all of yours? Or maybe you want to make an extra Christmas gift in thankfulness for all that God has done for you through the coming of his son Jesus? You can give via the collection in church or in many other ways, but please do not forget to gift aid your donation if you are able.

When we come to report our final 2023 financial figures next year, wouldn't it be amazing to be able to announce that, instead of a deficit, the church's finances show a surplus? Could you be part of making that possible?

Thank you, Kevin Lawrence for the benefice stewardship team

Advent Course Reminder

Just a reminder that our advent course begins soon. Please do sign up at the office. We will be using the Alistair Sim version of A Christmas Carol. It would be good if you can watch the whole film through before but is not essential.

We will be having soup and rolls. Do let me know of any dietary preferences. Rev Rachel.



New Year Walk

January 1st 2024

Starting at Walton Church



At 10am



Approx 1 hour walk. Dogs welcome, on leads please.

Tea/Coffee/Biscuits available after walk in the Church.

CHARITABLE GIVING 2024

As you may know, each of our churches nominate charities and mission partners to support financially each year, with those nominations being considered and approved by the PCC.

As 2024 is rapidly approaching we are now looking for nominations for organisations that we should support in the coming year. Our PCC's have agreed the following principles behind the selection of charities we will support.

- 1. Where possible we aim to support organisations who are specifically Christian, or where no such organisation can be found, those that have a Christian ethos.*
- 2. We value personal contact with those we support and particularly welcome proposals from church family members with personal links to a particular charity or cause.*
- 3. To ensure transparency and accountability, we will generally channel our support through UK registered charities.*
- 4. Our PCC's will always make the final decision on which charities each parish will support, informed by recommendations from church members, which have been reviewed by the churches charitable giving committee from across the benefice.*

- 5. Our support will be limited to a single year unless longer term support is specifically proposed and agreed by a PCC.*

If you have a charity or mission partner that you think your church should support, please pass on nominations to me at lawrencekv@aol.com or by contacting me at the Rectory by the end of January, so that these can be considered by our PCC's. It would be helpful to know not only what organisation but also specifically why you think we should support them and whether you would be willing to act as a champion for that charity in your church.

One of the ways we have tried to raise the profile of those to whom we offer support is through intercessions and regular sharing of information on Sundays and in Life, but to make that happen we need people prepared to act as champions and pass information on.

Please be prayerfully considering whether there is a particular charity or mission partner that you can nominate and whether you can act as a champion for them.

Kevin Lawrence

For the benefice Charitable Giving Group

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COP28

The UN conference on climate change is being held from 30th November - 12th December. The Church of England website has a guide to COP28 and what we can do. To find out more go to: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/church-england->

The Guide includes the following Prayer: -

God of blessings, the universe sings of your glory. Deepen our gratitude for all you have made and awaken in us a renewed commitment to care for the earth and each other. Inspire world leaders at COP28, with openness to listen to those most affected by climate change and with courage to act urgently and wisely, so that our common home may be healed and restored and all people, and generations to come, may delight in it. Amen. Sue Ripley

Walton Matters

Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name. Again, it says, Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the people extol him.

And again, Isaiah says, The root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope.

Romans 15. 9a-12. N.I.V.

Christmas card writing.

6 happy card writers met in the Church and started writing our cards with the help of mulled wine, mince pies, biscuits and music. I have to say some wrote more than others but it was a glorious social evening enjoyed by us all and let us think we are ahead of the game as far as Christmas is concerned. We shall see.

Remembrance Sunday.

A lovely large band of people gathered around the war memorial to commemorate the sacrifice of many during 2 World wars plus many other wars, still ongoing. Ana led us in a very moving service along with the British Legion and as always, we battled with the noise of the traffic before moving into the Church for the

next part of the service. We had a chance to talk and greet folk over our refreshments after the service which is always a joy.

Samaritans purse.

We were able to take 50 shoeboxes to a different drop off point this year and send them on the start of their journey to reach children in different parts of the world. Thank you all so much for your generosity and care for others especially vulnerable children. You always come up trumps and I am so grateful. In a future addition of the magazine I will tell you where our boxes have gone this year.

December 21st will be our last coffee morning of the year and it will be a festive one. Come and join us for coffee, mince pies, biscuits and a joyful time of singing carols together. We would love to see you.

No flowers through Advent.

Church decorating Thursday 14th December

Sandra Gristock

Messy Christmas

We will be hosting Messy Christmas in Holy Trinity Walton on Tuesday 5th December, 3.30 – 5pm and in the Mission Church,

Street on Thursday 7th December 3.45 – 5pm. With craft, games, snacks, songs and worship, Messy Church is aimed at primary school aged children and their families (though smaller children are always welcome too). If you know of children or have grandchildren locally, why not bring them along to join in the fun.

Ana Lawrence

Congratulations to Joe Tan (Mission Church) on celebrating a significant birthday recently and congratulations to Hugh Thomas (Compton Dundon) on also reaching a significant birthday.

The Bell Ringer's Training Centre Opens!

Saturday 14th October saw the official opening of the new Glaston Branch bell ringers' Training Centre after 19 months' detailed planning between the bell ringers' action group and the PCC. 30 people attended the function including PCC members, the church warden, neighbouring branch representatives and local tower captains. Revd. David Hatrey gave a blessing and Marilyn Backhurst the bell ringers' Association Deputy Master officially opened the Centre to loud applause. Refreshments followed and those present were able to go into the ringing chamber to see how the bells are rung using the new facilities and view a photographic display of the development of the project.

For training purposes, the bells can be muffled using cleverly cut sections of old motorbike tyres which cover each clapper so that when rung, the bells can't be heard outside. An electronic simulator sends signals from a sensor on each bell, through a mini-computer in the belfry to a laptop in the ringing chamber. This converts the signal into the sound of bells through speakers so that those ringing can "feel" the bells ringing normally but hear them through the speakers – and the outside world won't know they're being rung! When we want to ring the bells normally again, the muffles are turned 90 degrees and the exposed metal of the clapper rings the bells to the outside world again.

Why a Training Centre and why Holy Trinity?

Glaston Branch extends from Wells Cathedral in the north to Compton Dundon in the south, Westbury-sub-Mendip in the west to East Pennard in the east. There are 18 working church towers that ring in this area and our membership has been falling over the last few years, exacerbated by Covid, and we need to recruit more ringers. Not all towers can teach new ringers either because their bells are too heavy, their ringing room isn't conducive for teaching,

or there isn't someone with the right skills to teach. We only have about 6 people who can teach in the area so decided before going out on a major recruitment campaign, to establish a central Training Centre to ensure that future generations of ringers are taught to a consistently high standard in a tower with optimum facilities. Holy Trinity is ideal as it's geographically central, has an easily accessed ringing chamber which is also very pleasant to ring in, easily handled bells, and facilities for half-day or even day-long courses for established ringers to hone their skills and learn new methods.

Is it working?

It's very early days yet, but the early signs are good. We already have two new recruits having weekly lessons (one of whom is a PCC member) and we've recently been contacted by 2-3 people from Meare who are keen to find out more. We've had a number of articles appear in the local press, and three radio interviews have been given to GWS Radio (Radio Glastonbury), BBC Radio Somerset, and BBC Radio West, covering Somerset, Bristol, Gloucestershire, and Wiltshire.

We're very grateful for the ongoing support of the PCC and anyone interested in finding out more are welcome to contact Mike Palmer: GlastonBranch.Secretary@bath-wells.org

[Mike Palmer, Tower Captain of St John's Church Glastonbury.](#)



Christmas is Coming...

In this article on behalf of the Eco team I am taking a look at some of the many tips in articles that I have read suggesting how you can have a greener Christmas. I love Christmas so there will be nothing 'bah humbug' about this article. These are ideas I am trying to follow myself as well as telling you about them.

Buying presents

If you are searching online you could use one of the not-for-profit search engines like Ecosia. All their profits are used for combating climate change with at least 80% financing tree-planting projects around the world. Their solar panels produce enough energy to power your searches twice over, meaning more renewables (and fewer fossil fuels) in the energy grid. You could consider giving ethical presents from a Charity or other eco-friendly Organisation. As well as buying an ethical gift you would also be supporting a worthy cause. For example, as well as distributing shoe boxes Samaritans Purse also have a huge range of Christmas ideas. Alternatively consider giving a donation on someone's behalf to Tearfund or one of the other charities we are supporting as a Church.

You could try a Secret Santa for your family each buying just one, perhaps more expensive, present for one person but something they will enjoy and perhaps share. You could make presents using sustainable materials, there are plenty of ideas in books and on the internet and the Yeast Scrapstore is an Aladdin's cave

of things to use. Wrapping is also important; we all want our presents to look attractive but one thing I did last year and will do again is save the brown paper that is used for packing around things you buy and iron it and then use recyclable string and ribbon with a piece of holly, a fir-cone and some cinnamon sticks to make it look pretty. Recycle last year's Christmas cards to make new cards and tags to go on presents. Avoid glittery and foil type papers because they are difficult to recycle.

Food

Buy locally produced, seasonal products. One of my abiding childhood memories was going as a family to pick up the Christmas turkey. Dad returned to the car looking distinctly pale and said we would have to wait as he had to pick the turkey and they were just preparing it. Dear old dad wasn't expecting that! Well, he was a city boy trying hard to adapt to life in the country. If this story doesn't appeal maybe you should try a vegetarian Christmas. Eating more plant-based meals is good for us and for the planet. We are fortunate to have a fantastic farm shop not far from the Mission Church where you can not only buy vegetables and fruit but all sorts of lovely festive treats like cheese, chutney and jams.

Nature

Make sure you wrap up warm and spend lots of time outside, if you can, giving yourself time to enjoy God's creation. Look after wildlife this year making sure to know what is helpful for the little creatures in our gardens and what is not. Resist the urge to

sweep away all the leaves and other debris from your garden as many small mammals use them to keep warm. Set up a bird table or feeders and put out high fat foods (sunflower seeds, peanuts, bird food) for robins and other garden birds to keep them warm during the long winter nights.

***Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and a Peaceful New Year
from Suzie Williams and the Eco Church Group***



My Faith Journey

Those of you who know me will know that I love a good argument. Politics, religion, or something else; you name it and I'm happy to debate it!

Arguments are very much part of my faith journey. Whilst I come from a family who attended church as I was growing up, I cannot

say that this was an important part of my life, although, in the background, I always knew that this faith business was something I would have to sort out for myself in due course.

When I went to university, this, I thought, was my chance. University must be full of Christians who could deal with my questions and would enjoy a good argument every much as bit as I did. I was right and for the first few months of my student life I had a wonderful time debating the truth or otherwise of Christian doctrine with anybody foolish enough to get too close, usually into the wee small hours! But none of it convinced either me or, I suspect them! What I did find, coming into contact with Christians, was a quality of love and care between them that I had never seen before and wanted for myself. When the late-night arguments obviously weren't working, I was forced to consider whether there might be another way and, in February 1982, late one night, I sat down and said to Jesus that, if he was real then I was prepared to give my life to him, but that it would be good to see some evidence of that reality please!

I woke up the next morning and nothing had changed. I'm not sure what sort of evidence I expected, but what I did see over the following months was a change in me. I can't pretend I stopped enjoying a good argument, but I did begin to see God working to change my life, a change that is still going on over 40 years later.

Christians often describe their faith journeys in terms of mountains and valleys, and I can understand why. Over the years I have known God with me both on the mountaintops but even more so in the valleys. During times of redundancy, financial hardship, bereavement or uncertainty, my testimony is of the still small voice of the Spirit guiding, reassuring and encouraging. Sometimes that voice isn't enough, and God has to resort to what

is called in our family 'God's sledgehammer' moments, where God needs to speak loudly and directly either through others or actions when I am slow to listen. Some of these moments and stories I have shared as part of sermons preached in SWCD churches.

As a follower of Jesus, I have always seen myself also as a servant, bringing the gifts and talents that He has given me to serve the local church and other Christians to grow the Kingdom of God. Thus I have worked (in paid roles) in Christian charities and churches but have equally seen myself as a servant of the Gospel whilst working in 'secular' employment as a teacher, bank manager and fundraiser. I believe we are all called to serve, using whatever gifts God gives us, in his church as well as elsewhere and this has led me into, amongst other things, Reader ministry. Some would say this is another opportunity for me to argue, but without too much opportunity for people to argue back! I hope that isn't true!

Kevin Lawrence

Mission Church

SHARING GOOD NEWS AT CHRISTMAS

There is no better time than Christmas to share the Good News that we have as Christian people. Easy to say, but how do we actually do it? We don't have the marketing budget of John Lewis, access to a TV 'Christmas special' or indeed anything very tangible to give away or sell.

Yet, as a church family, there is so much that we can do in our communities to share the Good News. Here are a few suggestions.

Invite people to hear Good News. Everyone loves getting invitations and so let's invite friends neighbours and family to hear Good News at our special church Christmas services and events. Put carol services, crib services etc in your diary now and then invite others to join you in coming along.

Be a good news neighbour. Why not deliver the flyers, detailing special Christmas services and events in your community, down your street or indeed neighbouring streets, roads and lanes as well? We may not be able to afford a Royal Mail mailshot to the thousands of houses in our parishes, but with your help, we can reach every one!

Share good news in a card. Whilst less people send and receive Christmas cards these days there will still be millions popping through letterboxes in the coming weeks. Instead of cards picturing robins or sleighs and offering 'Xmas thoughts', why not ensure the cards you send have a clear Christmas message of Christian Good News. both in the pictures on the front and what is written inside? You could buy cards from a Christian charity, which also ensures that some of your Christmas spending goes to spread Good News!

Be a beacon of Good News! Every year, houses in our community will be decorated both inside and out. Will your decorations reflect the fact that Christmas is a festival to celebrate the coming of our Saviour into the world as a baby?

Good News is for sharing!

Happy Christmas!

Kevin Lawrence

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Exploring Worship

‘God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’

John 4 v24

Probably about a year ago now, Ana introduced the possibility of my training to become an LWA: Lay Worship Assistant. At the time this seemed quite daunting (a ‘what – me?!’ reaction.) Also, I was very involved with the school where I had retired from teaching, at the time as Chair of Governors, although now I am ‘just’ a Governor. So with more time available, I revisited the LWA calling, a seed that had been growing and gathering strength. Now was the right time to take action.

The course to enable me to become an LWA is the ‘Exploring Worship’ course.

It began in October and is 8 weeks long, with weekly sessions of two and a half hours.

I was excited to go to Castle Cary for my course and meet other Christians from churches from the town and surrounding villages. The course leaders are clergy from the Deanery of Castle Cary and Bruton, and the last two weeks have been led by the Area Dean, all with different types of ministry to share with us. To date we have looked at all age worship, BCP Matins/Evensong, Café Church, Morning prayer and healing services. The sessions are practical and I particularly engaged with the one focused on leading intercessions and choosing worship music.

One of our tasks was to attend and feed back on a service that is different from our regular Sunday worship. I was able to talk about the recent Walton 'Celebrate at 6' service, which included worship songs, a talk, open prayer and healing.

Another week we met in a large church in Templecombe and were asked to evaluate our peers on their voice projection and clarity when leading in church, all done with kindness and sensitivity.

Our final challenge is to work in pairs to prepare a whole service so together with another course participant we have chosen to plan a Celtic Service based on the theme of 'Light.' This is particularly rewarding since as long we include certain aspects integral to worship, we have free rein to be creative and we will present our service to the other groups at the end of November and share in theirs.

For me whatever happens going forward it has been fascinating to 'Explore Worship' in its many different facets and with Christians who worship in different ways in their home churches. There is another 'Exploring Worship' course after Christmas, but closer to home in our own Deanery. I could certainly recommend it as an experience to broaden our horizons about Worship in all its forms, styles and places.

Pat King, Compton Dundon

Afternoon Tea

On a cold, wet November afternoon a few of us arrived in the Mission Church for a Christmas craft activity, lots of chattering, laughing, tea and cake. Jenny Collins arrived with a selection of craft items to make Christmas cards. Each card was different. Some of us made professional looking cards, while others just enjoyed randomly sticking bits onto a background.

What Next?

**Christmas Afternoon Teas
Thursday 21st December
2-30pm till 4-00pm**



**We will be entertained by
The Trinity Handbells Group
Followed by**

**Tea, coffee, cake, biscuits and fellowship
All are welcome, including our friends from
the rest of the benefice**

See you there

Delyth Wride and The Team

ANNIE IN ZIMBABWE

One of the charities which we in Walton have supported for a number of years now is the work of Annie Makoni through One Hope Church in Harare, Zimbabwe. Annie, who is my niece, first

went to Zimbabwe for a Gap year following university around 30 years ago, and has basically been there ever since: coming back here for just one year in the 1990s, if my memory is correct, to qualify as a teacher at Bath. Her work in Harare has been getting alongside 'street kids' and trying to help them secure a sound footing in life: providing input towards their needs - both physical, like a hot meal, and spiritual, making known to them that Jesus loves and cares for them.

Many street kids are in fact young men in their late teens who have missed out on secondary education. This is not free and has to be paid for in many African countries. Families struggle to find the money and often give up on it. The youngsters may then become disillusioned and run away to the cities hoping to find jobs and make their fortune. The sad reality is the 99% certainty that they will end up homeless, living on the streets, searching waste bins for food – and very likely taking drugs to quell the pangs of hunger and keep out the cold in winter. Inevitably they join gangs which provide a means of identity and support with others in the same boat. They are seen as a public nuisance and regularly hounded by the police. Annie and One Hope Church reach out to these young people by giving them a hot meal and getting to know them. Sometimes a boy may require urgent medical treatment and they may be able to take them somewhere in Harare that can help. The soil in the area is very fertile and over the years Annie has been involved in various farming projects. Typically, these have been such enterprises as keeping chickens or rabbits and growing crops such as maize, which is a staple part of the diet: chiefly eaten in the form of maize porridge, known as 'sadza'. These projects involve a small team of lads working full-time. Working like this can be very beneficial in building their self-worth and afterwards they may feel

able to return home to their homes and communities and contribute to their support. On the other hand, sadly there are always one or two who are unable to resist the pull of street life and end up back on the streets. On the plus side there are those who have returned to school to do A levels or go on to university degrees, as well as those who have successfully been reunited with their families.

Annie sends us a monthly newsletter which helps us keep up to date and also to get to know the boys and how we can pray for them.

Recently the Harare area has had really bad hailstorms with hailstones so large that they have caused huge damage to the roofs of houses (see below) and killed small animals, birds, snakes, etc that were unable to shelter. It also caused terrible damage to crops. Annie's Christmas Appeal is for help with funds to repair the damage. Annie has two teenage children, Promise (who wants to be a hairdresser) and Ephraim plus two stepchildren, Esther and Emmanuel (known as 'Manu') and is married to Malvern.

If you would like to contribute towards the Christmas Appeal, enabling the completion of a new home for 4 new boys from the streets and help towards the cost of their one-year farming programme, you can do so here:

www.stewardship.org.uk/partners/20168768

Santons – the “little saints” of Provence

I had always wanted to have a set of nativity figures as part of our Christmas decorations but somehow we had never got any. But we finally bought some during our recent holiday in Marseille

in the south of France, after we visited a town called Aubagne - a centre for the traditional nativity figures of Provence called Santons (which means "little saints").

Most Santons are small terracotta figures which are painted (often in bright colours). The most common size for the figures is 7cm (just under 3 inches) but they can range from one inch to seven inches. To qualify officially as a Santon the figure must be hand-made in Provence. The clay is hand-pressed into a mould, baked and then hand-painted (in amazing detail).

The nativity scenes contain the familiar biblical characters. But there is something different about the shepherds – they are dressed in the traditional costumes of Provence. And there are hundreds of other Santon characters (who are not biblical characters) all wearing traditional costumes of Provence. So you can choose the characters you want and build a village with the nativity scene within it (and add new characters each Christmas). The characters represent trades, crafts or just types of people. So you might see a baker, a bee-keeper, a woman spinning or an old couple. At Christmas in the region, towns, churches and people in their own homes build nativity scenes with model villages sometimes containing hundreds of characters.

Santons are charming objects – well worth looking out for if you are in Provence. And you can buy them online (let me know if you want details of some companies in Provence who sell online – my email address is ian_jones@fastmail.co.uk).

The figures we bought are the ones you would normally see in a nativity scene: Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, wise men, shepherds and various animals. Why was I so keen to get them? Like many people I can't resist the glitz and frippery that comes along with Christmas (the lights, the wreaths, the decorations

etc). But this year I am hoping that the most beautiful and eye-catching decoration we have will be one which tells the real story of Christmas – the story of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Ian Jones



Picture copyright Guillaume Piolle

Manna

Let's make it an Eco Advent

This year across Bath and Wells, church and school communities, as well as families, are being encouraged to have an Eco Advent. You can

join in and combine the spirit of Advent with a commitment to the environment as you enjoy an eco-friendly journey to the manger... from the comfort of your own home.

Every day, as the countdown to Christmas continues, you can explore ways to reflect on and appreciate God's creation and share simple actions to take care of it better. Through Eco Advent, each day leading up to Christmas can be meaningful, both spiritually and environmentally.

Ruth Slade, Growing Faith and Everyday Faith Adviser says, "More and more people are aware of the environmental impact of Christmas and as Christians, of course, we are committed to caring for creation. We wanted to offer a fun resource to both celebrate our journey to Christmas and at the same time reflect on our duty to care for this beautiful world that God has gifted us.

"As well as offering daily Bible verses, prayers and reflections, everyone can join us in our Advent journey by first setting up a starry spiral path to a manger, and follow the daily tasks we are sharing on our website and social media channels. In true eco-fashion, there's no need to buy any special resources, just use what you have to hand to craft what you need to create your starry spiral and manger."

A helpful guide to joining in with Eco Advent is available to download from bathandwells.org.uk/eco-advent, where you will also find the daily Advent tasks. They will also be shared on our diocesan [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#) feeds.

Bishop's letter

A unique story

When I speak to my Mum on my birthday, she often recalls to me the events that surrounded my arrival in the world. These include nearly being born in the hospital lift, my older brother being smuggled in to see me under my dad's overcoat and of various aunts sneaking onto the maternity ward out of visiting hours by wearing their WRVS uniforms.

Each of us has a unique story about our birth. At Christmas we'll be recounting once again the story that we share about another birth - the birth of Jesus. Across the world we'll be re-telling and re-enacting what happened in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago. We'll recall the journey of Mary and Joseph, the birth in the stable, the arrival of the shepherds, the song of the angels, the visit of the Magi. Our own birth stories are unique to each of us. Jesus's is common to us all. And not just because we all know about it. For in our recollection of Jesus' birth, we'll also be remembering that that in him, God came to be at one with us. In Jesus God arrived to share fully in our humanity, experiencing complete solidarity with every aspect of our human condition. Jesus is 'God with us' – in trenches in Ukraine, bomb shelters in Israel and Gaza, in hospital wards where loved ones die, in relationships where there is conflict and distress.

Just as much as he is with us in our greatest joys and our deepest woes, Jesus is also for us. One of the earliest teachers of the Church said this: 'He became what we are so that we might become what he is.' The baby born in Bethlehem stands with us not only in all that we experience. This child also comes to offer us the possibility of opening every part of our lives to the transforming power of God's life of love and joy and peace. He comes so that every day we can become a little more like him.

This is the good news of Christmas and may it be yours this year.

A very Merry Christmas to you all. Bishop Michael

The Real Story of Christmas

'ALL WHO HEARD IT WERE AMAZED.' Luke 2:18NIV (2011 Edition)

To fully appreciate the story of Christmas, you must look at three things:

1. **Who God called to tell the story.** Shepherds! In first-century Palestine they were considered to be the lowest in society. Yet God picked them to tell the greatest story. Perhaps that's because some of us would have debated the story or even denied it. Not them: 'They spread the word' (v. 17 NIV 2011 edition). This answers the question, 'Could God use someone like me?' Yes, you don't need to be a scholar. Just tell people what you've seen and heard, and the change Jesus has made in your life.
2. **The response of those who heard the story.** 'All who heard it were amazed.' The grace of God is amazing: 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation' (2 Corinthians 5:19 NIV 2011 edition). The gospel is not good advice, it's good news! Your sin debt is cancelled; your books are reconciled, and now you can have a personal relationship with God by putting your trust in Christ. It doesn't get any better!
3. **Mary's part in the story.** 'Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2:19 NIV 2011 edition). She wanted to understand what God was doing, and how it related to her. And you need to do that too. God doesn't change, but He moves, and you have to stay in step with Him. There were many things Mary didn't understand about God's will, but she accepted and obeyed it. And that's what God is asking of you too.

From the daily readings in 'The Word for Today'. This booklet of devotional readings is published every three months and is available free of charge through the generosity of supporters, from: UCB Operations Centre, Westport Road, Stoke-on-Trent, ST6 4JF. Tel: 0845 60 40 401. Email: ucb@ucb.co.uk

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