

# Mike's message .....

## Uncertain times

It's been a while since we entered a New Year with as many uncertainties as we do this time. Globally, nationally and locally there are so many balls in the air that even the most adept of jugglers would struggle to make sense of them. Can they all be safely brought in hand?



As I write this its 2nd January and hopefully still a few days before the news starts to be dominated by the things that were halted prior to the Christmas break. In all likelihood there'll be more confusion and uncertainty to come. Getting to the truth and trying to make sense of what we're told brings the old phrase "smoke and mirrors" to mind.

What are we to make of this, and how does it relate to our faith and calling as Christians?

Above all else the Christian faith is about love. God's love for us given unreservedly and unlimited. The gift of that love is called grace - Amazing Grace as the hymn proclaims. Amazing because it cannot be earned, nor does it need to be as it's already been given to us in Jesus Christ. A love, the light of which "shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it" (*John's Gospel 1 .5*) as we heard in our Christmas readings. A love that cannot be defeated, even by death.

In response to God's love, given to us without measure we are called to love one another. That is difficult at the best of times and, in times of uncertainty and division even harder. But let us seek to reflect something of God's love for us in our dealings with one another and especially with those with whom we disagree.

Back in 1939 the year came to an end in a time of danger and uncertainty. King George VI, broadcasting live on the radio on Christmas Day from Sandringham, included some words from a poem called 'God Knows' by Minnie Louise Haskins. It's believed that the poem had been given to him by his 13 year old daughter Elizabeth, the present Queen. It's words are still very appropriate as we enter 2019.

*'God Knows'*

*And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:  
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."*

*And he replied:*

*"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.  
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."  
So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.  
And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.*

# Mike's message .....

## A grace filled Lent .....

One of my favourite poems is "Love bade me welcome" by George Herbert. Writing in the early 17th century, Herbert's poetry was written with ingenious use of imagery.

During Lent we'll be looking at the theme of Grace; God's love that transforms us. We'll be using Victor Hugo's 'Les Miserables' as the background to our Lent meditations (previous knowledge of the book is not essential).

Lent meditations will be on Tuesdays at 11.00am and Wednesdays at 7.00pm in church.

Although written two hundred years after Herbert's 'Love bade me welcome' there is the common theme of God's abundant welcome and our response. The poem is a dialogue between the character Love (God revealed in Christ) and ourselves. It speaks of God's acceptance of us even when we are unworthy. That is the Lent and Easter message, a love that is greater than our understanding, greater than our expectations, greater even than death itself.

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
 Guilty of dust and sin.  
 But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
 From my first entrance in,  
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
 If I lack'd anything.

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";  
 Love said, "You shall be he."  
 "I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,  
 I cannot look on thee."  
 Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
 "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame  
 Go where it doth deserve."  
 "And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"  
 "My dear, then I will serve."  
 "You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."  
 So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert (1593 - 1633)

May the grace of God transform our hearts and minds this Lent and Easter.

Mike Claridge



# Mike's message .....

## ***Pentecost changes us!***

This magazine covers the Feast of Pentecost (9th June). Pentecost means "Fifty days", and is a Jewish Harvest Festival held fifty days after Passover. In the first century it was a time crowds gathered in Jerusalem, speaking many languages, from around the Mediterranean and Middle East.



Pentecost is also a Christian festival, marking the end of the Easter season. For the first disciples the seven weeks since Jesus' crucifixion had been full of both wonder and of fear. They had spent time in the temple praising God (Luke 24 .53), made a return to their "day jobs" (John 21 .1 - 14) and had been terrified out of their wits (Mark 16 .8). They spent time locked away out of fear of arrest (John 20. 19 - 23). The horrors of Jesus' arrest, torture and execution were fresh in their minds, but there was something else just as unsettling in its own way. Jesus had been seen! Alive!

Those who had met the Risen Christ sometimes struggled to recognise him (John 21 .4 and Luke 24 .13 - 32). He behaved in strange ways, appearing through locked doors (John 20 .19) but being flesh and blood enough to eat broiled fish (John 24 .42) and with wounds that could be touched by Thomas (John 20 .24 - 29). He also had a habit of disappearing as quickly as he appeared (Luke 24 .31).

No surprise then that the disciples were a confused and frightened bunch as they gathered in Jerusalem. Things were about to get even more unsettling. In his second book, Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us:

*"the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent and, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages".*  
(Acts 2 .1 - 4)

It certainly turned heads! A crowd gathered to see what was going on and were astonished that they heard these uneducated Galileans speaking in a multitude of languages. Such was a babble that many assumed the disciples were drunk.

Pentecost transformed the lives of those first disciples. From timid, frightened individuals they became the nucleus of a movement that would change the world. Within a generation the message of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, had spread from north Africa to south India, from Spain to Iraq and all around the Mediterranean.

Pentecost can transform us too. The Holy Spirit can equip us to do new tasks in God's service here at The Cotteridge Church. To what is God calling you? God will equip you to do it, so give it a go!

## Mike's message .....

### Proclaiming God's Love

For the last three May Bank Holidays I've been part of a small group called 'Christians at Pride' operating outside Carrs Lane Church Centre.

The Saturday of the Bank Holiday weekend is the start of Birmingham Pride, a two day street festival of inclusion, and it begins with an enormous carnival parade. It took two hours to pass through Carrs Lane! From Banks to Football Clubs, Unions to Utility Suppliers, Arts Groups to The Royal British Legion - dozens of organisations are involved. What they hold in common is a commitment to inclusiveness including on grounds of sexuality and gender.

Our group, together with other 'Christians at Pride' colleagues who march in the parade, want to proclaim a God of love and inclusion. We want to speak of affirmation and acceptance. Our group greets the parade as it passes down Carrs Lane. We give out love heart sweets, water and, this year, stickers proclaiming "Love is Love".

The presence of Christians at Pride is evidently appreciated and, situated where we are, is a stark contrast to other Christians who, just before the parade reaches us, stand on High Street with banners speaking of condemnation and judgement. We want to project a different image of Christianity - one in which love, affirmation and inclusion triumphs. For that we are often hugged, kissed and thanked "just for being here".

The following are the words of one person on the parade, who I've known for some years (I'm the "Tall man with a familiar smile"):

*"We turned the corner down Carrs Lane, with our backs facing the yellow boards of selected scripture held high above (other) heads of supportive public faces. The words chosen by this first group of Christians were aggressive and made me feel sick. 'Sin' and 'vile' resounded in my head and I wondered, what about love? What about Gods teachings of love? Surely, even in our differences, this should be the driving message? Then a woman in a rainbow tutu and a tall man with a familiar smile headed towards us with baskets of love heart sweets and welcoming whoops and cheers. A sticker 'Love is love' was handed over and I read #christiansatpride. My smile immediately returned and I was reminded that faith is active through demonstrating love and kindness and those who follow a faith should not be put in a box. From a personal perspective of my journey, it was so important to be reminded that two aspects of my life, faith and sexuality, can be symbiotic."*

*Hannah (of SEEDS: Supporting Education of Equality and Diversity in School)*

Our churches are exploring how to be inclusive, with the URC having made the most progress with for example same-sex marriage. The Methodist Church is also about to consider that step. There will be differences of opinion among those reading this but I suggest that, as churches, we need to do all that we can to proclaim the inclusiveness of God - and that All are Welcome.



# Mike's message .....

## ***Our Church's Future Story***

All of you will know that this year is the 30th Anniversary of the congregation moving back into this building after extension and alterations. In a very real sense it's the 30th Anniversary of The Cotteridge Church itself. Earlier this year we had a weekend focussing on the past. There were displays of old photographs, records and registers. But an anniversary is about much more than the past. It's about the future too.



An excellent resource has recently come to my attention. Called 'Our Church's Future Story' it's a set of cards produced by The Methodist Church. The pack does exactly as it says by providing a toolkit for congregations to review where they are, where they want to be, and how to get there. It focusses on the natural life cycle of churches which, like any other living entity, show times of growth, times of thriving, times when the church wanes and the need for change and new life and new beginnings. There are a variety of activities and exercises and some probing questions. There are best and worst case scenarios to explore. There are steps to consider in building a new story for the church. Have a think about these:

Why do we exist? (*Mission: eg a sign of God's love in the community*)  
 How do we live and behave? (*Bold, welcoming, relevant?*)  
 What makes us distinctive? (*Vision, ecumenical, inclusiveity?*)  
 How will we engage with the future journey? (*worship, discipleship, giving*)  
 What will we do to move forward? (*strategy, new worship, community links*)  
 Who will do what? And how?  
 What's the most important now? (*in next 3 months, 6, 12?*)

Over the last weekend in September (28th and 29th) we'll be starting to consider a few of these things. Make a date in your diaries now and come along and be part of the start of the vision process.

The future isn't going to be the same as the past. In many ways it's futile and vanity to want us to return to being "like we used to be". Do we do that with our own lives? However the future life and discipleship of The Cotteridge Church can, with a little planning, be much better than ever if we all pray, think and contribute to that vision and are prepared to contribute to it.

# Mike's message . . . .

## Let your light shine!

**“LET your light so shine before men,  
that they may see your good works,  
and glorify your Father which is in heaven”.**  
*(St. Matthew 5.16, quoted from  
The Book of Common Prayer 1662)*



At the beginning of December we enter the season of Advent - a time of waiting, and of preparing ourselves for the arrival of Jesus Christ. Not just celebrating his birth two millennia ago, but preparing our hearts, minds and lives to welcome him when his Kingdom comes in its fullness. It's also a time of preparation to celebrate Christmas in other ways; buying that turkey, posting cards and, of course, giving presents.

One of the themes of Advent is light. We light a candle each week as we recall the great themes of God's journey with his people. Many churches hold Christingle Services (*Sunday 15th December 10.30am here*) celebrating Jesus Christ as Light of the World.

Thomas Cranmer placed the quotation above, from Matthew's Gospel, in his Prayer Book of 1549. It remained in the 1549 and 1662 're-writes'. Cranmer placed the verse just before the '*Alms for the Poor and other devotions of the people*' were collected. As a reformer, it was certainly no intention of Cranmer to link the giving of money with the "good works" mentioned in the verse. Far from it, opposing such a link that had driven much of the Reformation! Instead the "good works" would be evident in the almsgiving to the poor that was carried out by the church as a community. The church was called to be a Light to the World - and it still is.

The Cotteridge Church is a place where lives are transformed. From the Day Centre providing company for those who might otherwise be alone, to the Food Bank giving hope in times of crisis. From the Safe Space of the Youth Café, to the friendship of Thursday evening Coffee and Chat. The Cotteridge Church is called to be a Light to the World.

Running and maintaining all this takes money. It's a fact of life. As Christmas approaches, and we spend money on presents for loved ones, I invite us all to giving an extra present - a financial gift to the church's work - over and above what we give week by week. We are starting Advent this year with a Gift Day. Can we make an extra donation? Give a special Christmas Present, to the transforming work of The Cotteridge Church? We can give in cash, cheque or BACS. In doing so we can help the Light of Hope to burn on for others and our community, and transform lives through the love of God.

**May the good works of transforming lives continue to give glory to God. Amen.**

**Gift Day - Sunday 1st December 2019**