

# Mike's message .....

## 2015

Happy New Year, and I hope that you had a holy and peaceful Christmas!

A New Year dawns and I'm sure many of you will be putting dates year into new diaries or onto wall calendars. Our friends down at Holy Trinity, West Bromwich have once again produced an excellent calendar and their 2015 theme is 'Notable West Bromwich People'. There's a wide range of characters, from the highest paid Hollywood Star of her day, Madeleine Carroll, to members of heavy metal band Judas Priest, from the founder of Hudson's Soap empire to John Woodward who fiddled (or whatever the verb is for playing the cello) as Titanic sank.

One of the people featured in the calendar is being remembered both in 2015 and 2016 as both see significant anniversaries. The man is Francis Asbury and although born in Hamstead spent many of his formative years and early adult life here in West Bromwich. You can still see what was the family home down at the bottom of the Newton Road, next to the Malt Shovel.

Francis Asbury was born 270 years ago on 20th August 1745, and next year 2016 will see the bicentenary of his death on 31st March 1816. Asbury is a significant figure in the history of Christianity in the USA but his influence started right here in West Bromwich. His family were regular worshippers at All Saints' before Francis became inspired by the preaching of John Wesley. At just 18 years of age Asbury became a local preacher and was the 'First Class Leader' of what would become Wesley Church, West Bromwich. There's a plaque at Wesley recalling this. From the age of twenty-two Wesley appointed him as a travelling preacher. Then, aged just 26, Asbury travelled to America, then still a British colony, where he was to have a successful ministry over the next 45 years. He preached in court houses, pubs, town squares and fields, anywhere that a crowd would gather to hear him. He travelled on horseback and his journals revealed he averaged 6000 miles a year. Even today there are more Methodist churches in the USA bearing Asbury's name than Wesley's.

Asbury, and the others commemorated in the 'Notable People' calendar, remind us that although - with the exception of football - West Bromwich rarely features in the national news, remarkable people have started off here and still do. That's because all of us are, in different ways, remarkable individuals. We are loved by those closest to us and - whatever we do, we are loved by God.

Let's make 2015 a year to proclaim the message of God's loving acceptance of us as remarkable individuals too.



# Mike's message . . . .

## Lent: Pantomime and Passion

No sooner are the Christmas decorations returned to the loft than we start to focus on Lent!

In reality our observance of the Christmas and Epiphany season comes to an end with the great feast of Candlemas (2nd February). We'll be celebrating that in the closest Sunday, which is 1st February this year. Candlemas, or The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, is when we think about

Mary and Joseph taking the infant Jesus to the Temple to give thanks for his birth. It's recounted in Luke's Gospel (2 .22 - 40). After that account, apart from an intriguing reference to Jesus on a trip to Jerusalem at the age of about ten (Luke 2 .41-52), we hear nothing else about him in the Gospels for around thirty years of his life!

It's at the Presentation of Christ in the Temple that we remember the words of the elderly holy man Simeon, working in the Temple, who warns Mary that Jesus' life will be the means of the falling and rising of many in Israel, and that a sword will pierce her own heart too. The latter is seen as a reference to the sorrow and anguish Mary will encounter when Jesus is tried, convicted and crucified.

Candlemas is very much a time of turning from the Cradle to the Cross, from Christ's Birth to his Passion and death. Lent is always shortly after Candlemas, and this year there's barely two weeks before we enter Lent on Ash Wednesday (18th February).

Ash Wednesday will be marked at St Andrew's in two ways. Firstly we'll be holding a Fun Day for our young people, and any friends they want to bring. Details are available in church or from Margaret Morgan (and elsewhere in this magazine). It's a way of focussing on the season and it's meaning. Then, in the evening at 7.30pm, there'll be the Ash Wednesday Service with Imposition of Ashes (marking a cross on the foreheads of the present) from which the day takes it's name. It's a reminder of our mortality and our need to keep Lent as a time of repentance.

I'm indebted to Revd Liz Brown who'll be standing in for me on Ash Wednesday. As many of you will know I've taken on a role in the Wesley Pantomime (16th - 21st February at 7.30pm nightly), so will be treading the boards. If you want to come details of how to get tickets are in the Circuit Bulletin part of this magazine.

The art of Pantomime has a long history but some of it's origins are in common with the medieval Mystery Plays. Like pantomime they are also sometimes bawdy and slapstick. While pantomimes are usually on the theme of folk tales or fairy stories, Mystery Plays focus on the Gospel accounts - albeit often very loosely. At the centre of them though is that great narrative of Christ's Passion, his death and resurrection.

We'll be focussing on the Passion of Christ in our Lent Course this year. We'll be looking at Chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew's Gospel - and using art and music to help us understand the message of those chapters, and of our faith in Christ crucified and Risen. Details of the Lent Course can be found elsewhere in this magazine.

Come and join us on our Lenten journey.



# Mike's message .....

## *Called by name.*

Names are important. We all know the embarrassment of forgetting someone's name or, even worse, getting it wrong. One of the first things I check when I do a visit to plan a funeral is to check what name the person who has died was known by. Sometimes they are known by a shortened version of their first name, or their second - or sometimes a completely different name all together. Get it wrong and everyone at the funeral starts looking at each other. The person they knew just can't be called to mind by the wrong name. A name is who a person is. Names are that powerful.



Names are treasured. In my family history research I've recently realised that there's a regular pattern of naming children in each generation of Claridges throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Every Claridge couple would name their first son after the child's Claridge grandfather, and first daughter after the grandmother. It even continues into the early 20th century when the names are used as second names. It's a remarkable sequence and maybe even have helped trace back another generation into the late 17th century. Names can tell us about our past.

In our Lent Course this year we're looking at just two chapters (26 and 27) of Matthew's Gospel, the chapters represent just four days leading up to the death and burial of Jesus. They are referred to as the Passion Narrative and versions occur in each of the four Gospels. Each one is distinctive from the rest of that Gospel in a number of features. Firstly, the events are firmly placed in time, that time being the Jewish Passover. Secondly, the events of those four days are related in real time, unlike the rest of the Gospel which is spread over a vague period of around three years.

The third aspect that makes the Passion Narratives distinct is the use of names. Elsewhere in the Gospels very few people, other than the disciples, are named. We read instead of 'a man came to Jesus...' or 'there was a woman who ...'. However in Matthew's Passion Narrative we encounter a role call of names; Caiaphas, Simon the Leper, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Barrabas, Simon of Cyrene, Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Joseph, Zebedee and Joseph of Arimathea. The list in the Passion Narratives of the other three Gospels varies slightly but the effect is the same. The names root the account of the Passion in the personal stories of named individuals. A named 'passer by', Simon of Cyrene, is drawn into the agony of the road to the cross. A previously (in Matthew's Gospel) unnamed follower of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, is now drawn in to the events and ensures a dignified burial for Jesus. The scene is set for the events of Easter Day.

Then, in John's Gospel, in astonishment and fear at the sight of the empty tomb, a tearful Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Jesus. When he addresses her by name, 'Mary!', it's a reminder that he is calling each of us by name. Jesus calls us to be part of the drama of his risen life. He calls us because he loves us for who we are. He calls us by name.

# Mike's message . . . .

I'm writing this month's letter just ahead of Passion Sunday (22nd March). It's the Sunday before Palm Sunday and the themes of Lent, until now about repentance and forgiveness, take a dramatic turn. From now until Easter the remaining two weeks will be focussed on the specific events of Jesus' passion; his suffering, death and resurrection.

We've been focussing on much of this during the last five weeks at our weekly Lent Course. We've followed the Passion of Jesus as described by Matthew in his Gospel. We've accompanied the Gospel narrative with images from the visual art, and music - from Bach's St Matthew Passion to Jesus Christ Superstar. Bible study notes are still on line if you're interested (see link below). But this week (as I write) we will be ending our studies with Jesus dead and buried - a stone cold tomb, sealed by the authorities - hopes extinguished, love defeated!

As Christians we live with the benefit of hindsight. Our faith tells us that God's love is stronger than death itself. Just as the grave, and death itself, couldn't hold the body of Jesus, so too God's love lives on even when all around seems darkness, hopelessness and despair. Some people can witness to their experience of how in times of despair; bereavement, loss of work, breakdown of relationships, illness, hopelessness, they have experienced God's love breaking through in dramatic ways. For many others, including myself, it is a more gradual process of an awareness of God's love accepting us without condition - an all giving, all accepting love.

But how much do we live the Resurrection in our own lives, or those of our church communities? The Gospel for Passion Sunday (John 12 .20 - 33) includes:

*(Jesus said) "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit". (John 12.25)*

From death comes resurrection. But not just one-for-one. From a single dying grain comes forth much fruit. John is possibly quoting here from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15), written before John's Gospel. But leaving aside scriptural history what does it mean for us?

Sometimes we cling onto things in our lives, or the lives of our churches, that we need to let go of. We see something coming to an end as a failing. We're frightened of endings and death itself.

In faith we need to relinquish the past! Sometimes we need to stop propping up an ailing cause, building, service or event. Move on to pastures new! Let the past go! Let the past die! Our time, energy and resources can often be better spent in furthering the message of the love of God in new ways. That's because it's God's time, energy and resources. A God who cannot be contained in death of any sort. From what we are called to let die, God can raise up much fruit in new ways.

Have a happy and holy Easter and may message of the Resurrection bear the fruit of God's love in the lives of each and every one of us.

Mike Claridge



# Mike's message .....

## Ascension Day (14th May)

Forty days after the great feast of Easter comes Ascension Day. We'll be observing this at St Andrew's on Thursday 14th May with a 7pm Eucharist, followed by a Beetle Drive and Hot Dogs Social Evening.

Ascension Day is when, according to scripture, the Risen Jesus ended his earthly presence by 'ascending' into heaven. According to Luke in 'Acts of the Apostles' (Chapter 1 vv 9-11), this took place forty days after the Resurrection. Luke does have another account though, in his Gospel (24 .50-53), where Jesus' departure is sooner after Easter. (*see also* Mark 16.19).

The language of 'ascending into heaven' is strange to us these days. It comes from an age when heaven was 'up there', hell 'down below' and the earth was in between. Someone once called a literal reading of scriptures describing the Ascension as 'Cape Canaveral Theology' with Jesus 'blasting off' into space! That's how many old paintings depict it, and an ornate plaster ceiling in Rome has only Jesus' feet visible, sticking out below a cloud!

So what are we to make of The Ascension?

When we celebrate the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, at Christmas, we talk of God-became-Man. God sanctifies all human life by becoming part of it in the person of Jesus Christ. At Ascension the Risen Christ, still bearing the marks of human suffering on his hands, feet and side, carries the realities of our human lives into the very heart of God.

Charles Wesley reflected on this in this famous Ascension Day hymn:



### *An Ascension Day Hymn*

Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia!  
to his throne above the skies; Alleluia!  
Christ, the Lamb for sinners given, Alleluia!  
enters now the highest heaven! Alleluia!

There for him high triumph waits; Alleluia!  
lift your heads, eternal gates! Alleluia!  
he hath conquered death and sin; Alleluia!  
take the King of glory in! Alleluia!

Lo! the heaven its Lord receives, Alleluia!  
yet he loves the earth he leaves; Alleluia!  
though returning to his throne, Alleluia!  
still he calls mankind his own. Alleluia!

See! he lifts his hands above; Alleluia!  
See! he shows the prints of love: Alleluia!  
Hark! his gracious lips bestow, Alleluia!  
blessings on his Church below. Alleluia!

Still for us he intercedes, Alleluia!  
his prevailing death he pleads, Alleluia!  
near himself prepares our place, Alleluia!  
he the first fruits of our race. Alleluia!

Lord, though parted from our sight, Alleluia!  
far above the starry height, Alleluia!  
grant our hearts may thither rise, Alleluia!  
seeking thee above the skies. Alleluia!

There we shall with thee remain, Alleluia!  
partners of thy eternal reign, Alleluia!  
there thy face forever see, Alleluia!  
find our heaven of heavens in thee, Alleluia!

*Charles Wesley 1739*

# Mike's message . . . .

## Straight Talking

I'm going to talk to you about money.

Right then, for those of you who are still reading ...

It's easy to be uncomfortable thinking of churches talking about money. After all we teach about God's grace, an unconditional love as being, as John Wesley once said, "free in all, free for all". So why do churches need to talk about money?

Firstly, the churches need to carry out Christ's ministry. They need to speak about God's love and put that into practice. Like it or not the churches have been entrusted with large buildings handed down through the generations in which their ministry is located and from which their mission can be carried out. The maintenance of those buildings, and their mission, carries with it a financial burden. We can open doors, but the buildings need to be watertight, lit and heated. It costs money.

Secondly, the church has developed a specific ministry of clergy. Like us or loath us we are there to help run the churches alongside dedicated lay people who give their time voluntarily. The clergy are trained to help run the churches, to develop the skills of lay people, and preside at the sacraments of baptism and communion. The clergy, whether Methodist or Church of England, are paid a stipend. It is not a wage or a salary but a sum paid to set us free to serve. Whether we work 40 hours a week or 80 hours - and some do - it's the same pay.

So what this cost? In the case of St Andrew's it's around **£850 per week** to keep the church going! By far the biggest call are our payments to the Diocese of Lichfield (£14,000 per annum) and the Methodist Circuit (£5,500 per annum). Those add up to only about half the cost of employing one clergy person. Although the C of E stipend is currently about £24,000 (Methodist stipends are lower) with housing, pension, training and Diocesan etc services added the cost of ministry is around £44,000 per clergy post. Add to that the expenses of running, maintaining, heating and lighting the building, admin costs, sanctuary supplies (yes, we have to buy wine and candles), printing, photocopier hire, rubbish collection, copyright licences etc it's a costly business. We're helped in some of this by grants from, for example, The Stanley Trust and fees from funerals and weddings, but the biggest financial contribution has to come from the church's members.

**Why** should we give? Because it is in response to God's love, which is given to all, without reservation. We want churches ministry to tell others about that love

**How** should we give? Regularly! This can be by the 'envelope scheme' which is efficient. But what about when you aren't there? Will you remember to give? Why not have a Standing Order through you bank? You'll never be searching for cash on a Sunday morning again!

**What** should we give? That really is a matter between you and God. But how much do you spend each week or month on for example: petrol, a satellite subscription, meals out, newspapers, mobile phones, internet. How does your response to God's love compare to those?

Contact me at [mjclaridge@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:mjclaridge@tiscali.co.uk) or 0121 553 1871 if you would like to discuss how you can give to the ministry of St Andrew's. There's no time better than now. Don't put it off.



# Mike's message .....

## Working Together

For most of the time I've been at St Andrew's I've also preached at other churches on the Methodist Circuit. It's something I greatly enjoy and it's a privilege to be part of our two churches; The Church of England and The Methodist Church.

Until this year my contribution to the Circuit was purely voluntary. However, as the two churches each needed to cut staff across the area it made sense to combine my roles. The Methodist Church agreed to pay the Diocese of Lichfield (Church of England) for half the cost of my ministry. I'm still paid the same as before, but half is financed by each church.

There have been changes to the way I work. I now have the great pleasure and privilege to have, in addition to St Andrew's, pastoral charge of Ryders Green Road Methodist Church and also a share with Revd Phil Thomas in the care of Wesley, West Bromwich. Whereas before most of my involvement on the Methodist Circuit was on Sundays I now divide my time "on a joint and equal basis between the two churches" (as the Diocese describe the arrangement).

As years go by I believe that this arrangement will have to become more common. The Church of England and the Methodist Church are united by much more than divides them. Not only will there be a need to share ministers, but also buildings as we have done at St Andrew's for over 25 years. Far too many resources that should be used on mission and service to the community, are tied up in the care of church buildings.

In the midst of all this I've been asked by the Diocese of Lichfield to take on the role of Area (Rural) Dean. This role is a link between the Diocese and the Church of England parishes in West Bromwich and also has a strategic role in planning for the future. I will be working to discern where God wants us to work together as The Methodist Church and The Church of England in future.

Please pray for my ministry as I pray for yours.



### Service of Confirmation and Membership

Sunday 11th October 2015  
9.30am

We will be welcoming The Rt Revd Clive Gregory (Bishop of Wolverhampton) to St Andrew's on Sunday 11th October.

This is our Service of Confirmation and Membership at which children (10 years old and over) and adults can renew the vows made for them at their Baptism, which may have been when they were a young child.

Confirmation is also, by tradition, admission to receiving the bread and wine at Holy Communion. It is also when, as part of our shared life as an Ecumenical Partnership, those confirmed become members of the Methodist Church as well as communicant members of the Church of England.

If you are interested in being Confirmed and admitted to Membership please see me for details.

*Mike*

# Mike's message .....



## “Entertaining angels unaware”

We've all seen the images on our TV screens of the people in the camps at Calais. I'm sure we all have different ideas about what is happening and what should happen.

What has concerned me, and many others, is some of the language being used. For the Prime Minister of this country, or anyone else, to describe people as 'a swarm', or of migrants 'marauding', is irresponsible and dangerous. A statement by four churches, including The Methodist Church, warns that the danger of such language is that it “encourages people to see those in desperation as less than human, and so less deserving of sympathy, respect or dignity”.

I have been in Refugee camps twice in my life. In 1991, on a private visit to Hong Kong, I was able to visit RAF Sek Kong Detention Centre. There 9000 men, women and children were crammed into an area 900 metres by 150 metres on a disused runway. They were Vietnamese 'Boat People', most were Buddhist but a sizeable minority were Christian (mainly Roman Catholic). I visited because back in the UK as part of my theological training I was involved with a placement in Handsworth helping Vietnamese Roman Catholics to settle here and learn English.

In 1994 Susan and I were in Sri Lanka for a month where I was studying the role of the church in reconciliation, in the context of the civil war that was raging there. We visited the war area and saw many displaced people but it was in Colombo, the capital, where we visited a camp. That one was in a hall, barely bigger than St Andrew's, and was 'home' to 450 people comprising 149 families, each family being allocated a 2 metre by 2 metre 'booth'. They were Tamils who had fled from the war torn north of Sri Lanka. Most were Hindu but again there were a minority who were Christian (again mainly Roman Catholic) and also a few Muslims.

In Calais there is a similar demographic with most of those in the camp being Muslim, but again with a sizeable Christian minority, from the Orthodox churches of north Africa and Syria.

What struck me on my visits to the camps, and of what I've seen of the Calais situation, is the dignity of the people there. Many relate to their experience and situation in terms of faith. For Christians and Muslims for example there is the common inheritance of tradition, recorded in Jewish scriptures, of Moses and the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. For Christians there is also the tradition that Jesus, Mary and Joseph, were themselves refugees in Egypt when they fled the tyranny of Herod. There they found safe refuge. Some of those in Calais, and others elsewhere, will need to find refuge here. As the writer to the Hebrews says in practicing hospitality we sometimes entertain angels unaware (Hebrews 13 .2). I learnt a lot about faith from my visits to the camps.

The abiding memory I have of my visits to the camps was of the dignity of the individuals and the hope that is embodied in their lives through faith, even when facing the most severe hardship. In response, as this week's statement from the churches says, we need to:

“Remember the importance and equal value God places on every human life, and to seek wisdom that we can challenge injustice and work for peace for the whole world”.

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For the papers about my visits in Hong Kong and Sri Lanka, and the recent church statement, go to:  
[www.mjclaridge.co.uk](http://www.mjclaridge.co.uk)

# Mike's message .....

## Look at the MAP!

“Every parish should have a MAP”. That’s what the Diocese of Lichfield say anyway. MAP in this instance isn’t something to show where you are located, or are heading in geographical terms. MAP is an acronym. MAP stands for Mission Action Plan and, as we’re told, every parish should have one, in the context of our Anglican identity we’ve produced one.



A MAP isn’t entirely dissimilar to the geographical kind of map though. Both are designed to be able to show you where you are going. We’ve produced MAPs (that’s Mission Action Plans) in the past and then, for various reasons, they sort of dropped off the agenda at St Andrew’s, and indeed at other Church of England churches in West Bromwich Deanery. Now they are back on again. Our’s went to Church Council in September. It’s the MAP for 2016 and is short and sweet. It does however have some defined time scales of things we want to do - “where we want to go” - in a number of key areas.

There’s a copy of the MAP 2016 below. Take a look at it. If you want to download a copy it can be found in the resources section of [www.mjclaridge.co.uk](http://www.mjclaridge.co.uk). We’re not alone in producing MAPs. Other parishes are doing so too. Also the Deanery are writing a Deanery MAP 2016. The new Black Country Circuit of the Methodist Church has produced a Mission Statement, with broadly similar aims. That can be found on the Circuit website - which can be accessed via my website (link below).

Let’s use our MAP to guide us as we journey on as Christ’s disciples telling others of the abundant love of God.

The Church of England  
West Bromwich DeaneryThe Methodist Church  
Black Country Circuit



**St Andrew's Church, Carters Green, West Bromwich**

**Mission Action Plan 2016**

**Our Goals, Aims and Timescales for 2016 are:**

- 1) **To contact residents as they move into the new homes.**  
Aim: To provide them with information about St Andrew's activities.  
Timescale: To make a concerted effort to advertise Christmas 2016 events.
- 2) **To develop regular 'Messy Church' events, building on the Fun Days.**  
Aim: To provide a friendly, informal worship and learning context.  
Timescale: To hold two Messy Church events by the middle of 2016
- 3) **To work with the YMCA as it's new building is brought into use.**  
Aim: To discover ways in which we can work together on the shared site.  
Timescale: To meet with YMCA staff before the end of November 2015
- 4) **To build up links with Ryders Green Methodist Day Centre.**  
Aim: To provide helpers who can pop in for a chat with the Centre's users.  
Timescale: To invite members of St Andrew's to pop in at any time.
- 5) **To develop our finances, by improving our giving.**  
Aim: To move towards being a solvent, self-financing congregation.  
Timescale: To plan and hold a Gift Day at Patronal Festival starting 2015
- 6) **To extend the time our building is in use during the week**  
Aim: To enhance it's role at the heart of community  
Timescale: This will be an ongoing priority.
- 7) **To play a full part in the life of the Deanery, Circuit and wider church.**  
Aim: To grow in fellowship and discipleship as we journey together.  
Timescale: This will be an ongoing priority.

This Mission Action Plan was prepared for the ECC on Monday 28th September 2015  
Church Website: [www.mjclaridge.co.uk/standreshome.html](http://www.mjclaridge.co.uk/standreshome.html)

# Mike's message .....

## Remembering

November is a month of Remembering!

It starts with the Feast of All Saints' (1st November) when the church remembers all the faithful throughout the generations who have followed Christ at great cost to their own lives. It's especially a time of remembering those who don't have their own 'Feast Day' in the calendar. All Saints' Day is followed by All Souls' Day (2nd November) when all who have died are remembered - a poignant time especially for those who have lost loved ones recently.

November is also the time of Remembering those who have died in war and conflict. Its origins are from Armistice Day, 11th November 1918. That was the day that the armistice was signed at Compeigne (France) at 11.00am. It brought to an end the 'Great War' (later called The First World War). Nowadays Remembrance is often focussed on the second Sunday in November, Remembrance Sunday, which is the 8th November this year. We'll be holding our service at 9.30am as usual, but starting with an Act of Remembrance including a two-minute silence. At 11.00am I'll be starting the Family Service at Wesley with an Act of Remembrance too. I'll also be leading a service in Heath Lane Cemetery - where the original West Bromwich War Memorial is located - at 11.00am on Wednesday 11th November.

Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day are also the focus of the Royal British Legion's Poppy Appeal. The 'Legion' raises funds by selling poppies to help those who have been scarred by war and conflict. Those helped included the families of people who have paid the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. Many people wear a Remembrance Poppy as a sign of their support for the 'Legion' and its work. It's also regarded as a sign of respect for those who have died or been injured.

Some however, for various reasons, chose not to wear a poppy. Wars are fought in the name of freedom and people should have the option not to wear a poppy if they so wish. One West Bromwich Albion player, James McClean, exercises his right not to wear a poppy and has explained in detail why he does so. There should be no stigma associated with exercising the freedom not to wear one. The silence and commemoration should however be observed with respect by all.

Whether people wear a poppy or not, we are asked to remember those, from all nations, who have died or been injured in war and conflict. Arguments of how we do that should not get in the way of the central message that:

*At the going down of the sun, and in the morning: We will remember them.*



# Mike's message .....

## Preparation!

It's a time of preparation!

I've been sorting out my Study at the Vicarage. It's amazing how much clutter we gather over the years. Old meeting papers, brochures, service sheets and those things we once must have thought 'might come in useful' but, let's be honest, they never did!

I'm being ruthless. If I don't need it now, and if I can easily find something to replace it if I need to in future, out it goes!

It's a timely 'sort out'. It is Advent after all. Advent is about preparing for the coming of Christ. The word 'Advent' is from the Latin 'adventus' (coming) and it's a two-fold preparation. Just around the corner is Christmas, a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, The Word made Flesh, some two thousand years ago. We are preparing for the celebration of that 'coming'. But there's a deeper, more challenging, theme to Advent. The readings at worship remind us that God's plan is ongoing - he hasn't finished with his world yet - and in the fulness of time he will complete his plan and Christ will return.

The idea of a 'second coming' sometimes becomes associated with what some of us would regard as the fundamentalist wing of the Christian faith. But it's mainstream belief and doctrine. Advent is a time of preparation - but for what are we preparing?

Sometimes the preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem can get in the way of preparing to greet the coming of Jesus Christ again! We can get so engrossed with Christmas decorations, Christmas card writing, Christmas shopping, planning Christmas parties and Christmas family gatherings that we miss Advent.

Advent doesn't start until 29th November. By then there'll be that many carols being played in shops, lights on the High Street and seasonal "bon homie" that we can be in danger of missing Advent all together! We need to prepare properly by reviewing how we live our lives. What's really important? To us? To God? Do they match up? God hasn't finished with this world yet and Christ's return in glory is promised. That will be a time of judgement, but we don't need go through Advent with miserable faces, like Scrooge uttering 'Bah Humbug' because Christ's return will also a time of completion of God's purposes. The Kingdom in it's full glory.

As Paul writes to the Corinthians:

*"now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face"*

(1 Corinthians 13 .12).

