

 THE
RECORD

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THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND
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WELCOME TO THE DECEMBER RECORD



IT'S A REAL JOY TO BE ABLE TO SHARE SOME GREAT CONGREGATIONAL NEWS THIS MONTH, from fundraising efforts in Skye, to a new song in Newmilns and the ongoing gospel work of Greenock Free Church. Please continue sending news from your own congregation as we seek to encourage one another.

Following a few recent questions, I wanted to confirm that printed copies of *The Record* are available. If you haven't been receiving yours, and would like a paper copy, please get in touch and we'll organise this for you.

However you intend to mark it this year, I pray you will have a blessed Christmas. As we prepare for the New Year, we do so looking to him whose word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105) ●

If you have any news articles please send them to dayspring.macleod@icloud.com.

Yours in Christ

John

**That in all things he might
have the pre-eminence**
Colossians 1:18

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BY **THE EDITOR**

GREAT LIGHT

Rejoice in spite of the darkness –
Christ is King



In the dark, it is light we need. At Christmas, it is light that is given to us. 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light'

WE ARE CONTINUOUSLY TOLD THAT CHRISTMAS WILL BE DIFFERENT THIS YEAR. It is not so. It might look different. It might even feel different. But it will not be different. Christ is still King.

DARKNESS

Darkness has been close at hand in 2020. The Mental Health Foundation reports that 84% of adults in Scotland have experienced stress because of COVID-19. The Foundation's monthly surveys show that about one quarter of people have felt lonely and 20% have felt hopeless throughout the pandemic. 10% of adults, and a quarter of people aged 18-24, have experienced suicidal thoughts. Illness, bereavement, and the fear of them, still linger nine months after coronavirus first made its presence felt here. Even those to whom God has granted good health and secure employment are weary. We want community, and communion. We want to congregate.

From the early days of the pandemic, there have been those who have questioned the wisdom of lockdown measures. The fatigue of continuing restriction has seen more join this chorus, some doing so in Jesus' name. The majority still accept the necessity of mitigating the spread of the virus, but nevertheless feel the oppressiveness of a COVID winter. Our culture is leaning on gallows humour. But #2020Challenge can only bring levity, not relief. In the dark, it is light we need.

LIGHT

At Christmas, it is light that is given to us. *'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light'* (Isaiah 9:2). Isaiah's metaphor speaks of a human condition where there is lack of knowledge as well as wilful blindness. And it points us to *'the true light, which enlightens everyone... coming into the world'* (John 1:9).

Sin's darkness is ever-present, but sometimes it is more obvious. It is easier to ignore in comfort. In an era of fear and confusion, where health – long taken for granted – suddenly seems precarious, creation's groaning can be heard more clearly.

In such times, what a privilege it is to see the great light. In Christ, we are freed from our ignorance and from our fear. *'For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given'* (Isaiah 9:4-6).

In the classic carol, O Holy Night, Placide Cappeau writes, 'Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appear'd and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.'



We are a people between two advents, celebrating Christ's first advent, and waiting expectantly on his second. But we don't wait alone. And we don't wait idly.

The world is ever in need of this hope. In a year of weariness, we pray there are many ready to see the great light for the first time, and rejoice. The hope that we have rests in Jesus' fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. The baby the shepherds knelt before is now seated *'on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore'* (Isaiah 9:7).

On Christmas Day, 1530, Martin Luther pointed out to his congregation that most people rejoice when they receive a Christmas gift. 'But how many are there who shout and jump for joy when they hear the message of the angel: "To you is born this day the Saviour"? Indeed, the majority look upon it as a sermon that must be preached, and when they have heard it, consider it a trifling thing, and go away just as they were before.

'We do not believe that the virgin mother bore a son and that *he* is the Lord and Saviour unless, added to this, I believe the second thing, namely, that he is my Saviour and Lord.

'When I can say: This I accept as my own, because the angel meant it for me, then, if I believe it in my heart, I shall not fail to love the mother Mary, and even more the child, and especially the Father. For, if it is true that the child was born of the virgin and is mine, then I have no angry God and I must know and feel that there is nothing but laughter and joy in the heart of the Father and no sadness in my heart. For, if what the angel says is true, that he is our Lord and Saviour, what can sin do against us?

Sin, and its curse, can do a great deal of harm to body and mind. Enforced separation from friends and family can bring loneliness and anxiety. Unemployment can bring hunger and worry. COVID can be deadly. But, 'where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in'. Luther understood the glorious consequences of Jesus' birth: *'God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'* (2 Corinthians 4:6). When that light shines in our hearts, we are among those who jump for joy at the proclamation of the Saviour's birth because at Christmas, God became man. *'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'* (John 1:14).

Even as we look on the child in the manger, the wonder of Jesus' incarnation can elude us. God's own Son took on a human body, the same as ours. His body experienced pain in the way our bodies do, and broke as ours would when subjected to violence. He took on a human mind with its inherent limitations, no longer all-knowing, but required to learn (Luke 2:52). He knew the devastation of bereavement (John 11:35) and the harrowing fear of standing before the holy God, bearing our sin. The prospect left him *'sorrowful, even to death'* (Matthew 26:38).

The birth we celebrate at Christmas, then, means that *'we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses'* (Hebrews 4:15).

As we await our King's coming, the joy and celebration of Christmas reminds us of the salvation that is ours, of the great light we have seen. Christmas has not changed.

Instead, we have a King and a brother who has gone before us to prepare a place for us (John 14:3). With Luther, we rejoice at the message of the angel. Through the darkness of pestilence, anxiety and isolation, Jesus remains our Saviour. He is the one who said, *'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'* (John 8:12).

WAITING

Having seen the great light, we are to walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8), in the knowledge that our Saviour is enthroned as King. Whether or not we can meet together to sing his praise, he remains sovereign over all. Even in unfathomable providence. As a result, even if Christmas the festival is different this year, Christmas the reality is unchanged. Jesus came. He took on flesh and lived among us. He did what Adam could not, his completed work giving an *'abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness'* which leads to eternal life (Romans 5:12-21).

News of promising vaccines rolling out offer some light at the end of COVID's tunnel. But they are not The Light, and God willing, they will allow the pandemic to be controlled. But they cannot make up the loss that we have experienced this year. We should mourn the lives, health and fellowship we have lost to COVID. Then praise God because our hope for restoration rests on Jesus and on the promise of his return. We are a people between two advents, celebrating Christ's first advent, and waiting expectantly on his second. But we don't wait alone. We have a Helper in the Holy Spirit who is with us forever (John 14:16).

And we don't wait idly. There is work to be done. The Great Commission is not on furlough. The gospel is still to be preached to all nations and to all people. The Free Church still wants to see a healthy, gospel church for every community in Scotland. This is not possible in our own strength, or even in the combined strength of our congregations. It is in the power of the Holy Spirit that the work is done.

C.H. Spurgeon counselled some of his students that 'faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy, since she places her hand in that of her Great Guide. Between this and Heaven there may be rougher weather yet, but it is all provided for by our Covenant Head. In nothing let us be turned aside from the path which the divine call has urged us to pursue.'

As we await our King's coming, the joy and celebration of Christmas reminds us of the salvation that is ours, of the great light we have seen. Christmas has not changed – Christ remains Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). As we rely on him to sustain us through COVID's uncertainty, let's remember those still walking in darkness.

2020 has brought trials which have been both unexpected and heavy. But fallen humanity needs a Saviour as much as it ever has. In 2021, our light must be on a stand, giving light to all in the house (Matthew 5:15). ●

WORLD NEWS

AMERICAS AFRICA EUROPE ASIA AUSTRALASIA



MINISTER'S TITANIC LETTER SOLD

A letter written by a Scottish Baptist minister who sacrificed his own life to allow others to escape from the *Titanic* has sold for £42,000 at auction. John Harper wrote to a fellow minister on *Titanic* stationary and posted his letter from a port in Ireland. Harper ministered at Paisley Road Baptist Church, Glasgow — later renamed Harper Memorial in his honour. He refused a seat in a lifeboat alongside his daughter and sister, instead deciding to stay on board the *Titanic* to offer comfort to other passengers. He later gave his life-jacket to another passenger who survived. Afterwards, other survivors reported that Harper continued to preach the Gospel as the ship sank. ●



SCOTUS BACKS CHALLENGE TO COVID CHURCH RESTRICTION

The Supreme Court of the United States placed a temporary suspension on a New York order which would have limited the number of people who can attend churches and synagogues. The measure came in response to increasing cases of COVID-19. The justices were split 5-4, a reversal of a similar case earlier this year in which the court decided to leave attendance restrictions in place in California and Nevada. On this occasion, the court decided that the measures 'single out houses of worship for especially harsh treatment' and 'strike at the very heart of the First Amendment's guarantee of religious liberty'. The majority opinion, opposed by Chief Justice Roberts and the court's three Democrat-appointed judges, also noted of worship services that 'remote viewing is not the same as personal attendance'.

This marks the first occasion in the US where a high court has sided with a religious denomination challenging COVID restrictions. The case was brought by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, New York.. ●



POLICE HALT LOCKDOWN BAPTISM

Police stopped a baptismal service in Islington, London in mid-November after around 30 people gathered in breach of lockdown restrictions. Regan King, pastor of The Angel Church, a Baptist congregation, told *BBC News* that the service was for 'the greater good'.

'It's about loving our neighbour, and you can talk with a number of people here who are extremely vulnerable, homeless or on the verge of being very isolated,' he said. King agreed to hold a 'socially distanced outdoor gathering in the church courtyard' after officers stood at the entrance of the church to prevent people from entering.

A spokesperson for the Metropolitan police said, 'Officers explained that due to COVID-19, restrictions are in place preventing gatherings and that financial penalties can be applied if they are breached.' ●



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONFERENCE



The third Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief, hosted virtually by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, took place last month. The forum invites senior diplomats from around the world to ensure religious liberty is at the heart of foreign policy. According to the *Pew Research Centre*, 40% of the world experiences significant restriction on religious freedom, and COVID-19 has resulted in increased persecution. 'Malign actors have tried to use COVID-19 to restrict religious freedom,' Sam Brownback, US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, told the conference. 'The need to expand religious freedoms and protect religious minorities has become a global priority.' ●

IRANIAN HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS FREED



Two Iranian Christians, sentenced to a combined ten years in prison, saw their sentence overturned on appeal, according to religious freedom group *Article18*. House church leader Aziz Majidzadeh, known as Andreas, and another defendant who could not be named were initially sentenced to four and six years respectively. However, a judge overturned the verdict on appeal, deciding that there was insufficient evidence that their leadership of a house church constituted 'actions against national security'. The verdict came as a surprise because numerous charges of actions against national security have been upheld against house church members in Iran. ●

FIGHTING IN ETHIOPIA DIVIDES CHRISTIANS



The Tigray region in northern Ethiopia has seen fierce fighting since early November between forces loyal to the national government and those in the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF has dominated local government in Tigray for the last 30 years, but Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has pursued political reforms which have curtailed the group's influence. The TPLF had been invited to work with the central government, but has concentrated in consolidating support in Tigray. The fighting started with seemingly coordinated attacks by TPLF forces on government soldiers stationed in the northern region. Fighting has continued along ethnic lines, with church workers in the region dismayed that a shared faith has not prevented further violence. A foreign Christian worker commented, 'What we saw is that ethnic identity is much stronger than religious identity.'

Edward Brown, national director of World Vision Ethiopia, has said that the conflict is 'part of the broader global narrative around identity and the tribalization of politics. But here, it is not just winning or losing an election. It's life or death: access to land, access to food... the stakes are so high.'

'In Ethiopian, covenant (kalkidan) is a compound word meaning "promised word", based on the biblical, relational understanding: "I will be Your God and you will be my people."

'There has to be a covenant to keep Ethiopia together.' ●



ARAB CHRISTIANS RESPOND TO FRANCE'S DEFENCE OF FREE EXPRESSION

Following the murder of teacher Samuel Paty after he used caricatures of Muhammad as part of a class discussion on freedom of expression, French President Emmanuel Macron has said, 'We will defend the freedom that you taught so well, and we will strongly proclaim the concept of secularism.' French officials have shut down a mosque which shared a video expressing hatred of Paty, and dissolved a Muslim charity which had been linked with Islamic extremism.

The National Council of Evangelicals in France has supported their government's actions. But *Christianity Today* found differing views among Arab Christian leaders. Habib Malik, a Lebanese Roman Catholic whose father co-authored the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, said, 'the line should be drawn when freedom is used to undermine freedom...I am fully and completely with Macron, to take the severest measures.'

Egypt's Anglican Archbishop Mouneer Anis is more moderate, arguing that 'freedom of expression should be guaranteed for everyone, as long as it is not used to offend'. Anis has previously called for an international ban on the defamation of religions drafted by the UN.

Botrus Mansour, chair of the Convention of Evangelical Churches in Israel, notes that local Arab Christians often experience backlash when Westerners use their freedom of expression to criticise Islam, and so counsels that, 'It is better to be wise and cautious than to be right. Practice self-restraint to live together with respect.'

Martin Accad, chief academic officer at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, is unequivocal. 'The behaviour of these countries is reprehensible,' he says, calling Muslim outrage 'childish'. According to Accad, criticism and insult produces maturity in the believer, and the proper response is dialogue. ●



PORTREE AND BRACADALE, THE HEART OF SKYE CALENDAR

DURING 2020, PORTREE AND BRACADALE FREE CHURCH HAVE BEEN WITHOUT OUR USUAL ENJOYABLE COMMUNITY CAR WASHES, COFFEE MORNINGS, CURRY NIGHTS AND GIFT SALES TO HELP WITH FUNDRAISING FOR OUR NEW BUILDING PROJECT. Instead, one of our elders, Dr Charlie Crichton, made the most of lockdown, the good weather, and the stunning Skye scenery. He put his photography skills to good use, producing a beautiful A3 calendar for 2021. We hope this will raise some funds as we look forward to digging foundations in the very near future.

On the inside cover, Dr Crichton explains a bit of the background to the production of *Portree and Bracadale, The Heart of Skye 2021 Calendar*.

'In 2016, the Free Church congregations of Bracadale and Portree were joined up to become one parish which extends from the west coast to the east coast, that is, across the middle of the Isle of Skye. It therefore finds itself as the geographical heart of Skye, and it has the spiritual wellbeing of Skye in its heart.

'My pictures try to convey something of the beauty of God's handiwork in the Portree and Bracadale areas, but also to give a grounded awareness of the realities of life — the empty car park in Somerled Square speaks of an unsettling era in our nation's history, and the "blue bin" street is close to Portree Primary School, where we worshipped for 20 years until we could not do so from March 2020.

'We trust that 2021 will allow for resumption of normal life, for congregations to meet again to worship God, and for our new building project to be realised.'

This calendar would make a lovely gift, or can be enjoyed hanging on your own kitchen wall. If you would like a copy, contact John Angus Gillies (Gillie) by email (john.gillies@mowi.com) or mobile (07900050473) and he'll get one to you wherever you are!

Each calendar costs £6 and if you live outwith the Skye and Lochalsh area, then an additional £2 would cover the cost of postage. ●



January — Portree and Bracadale, The Heart of Skye 2021 Calendar



May



June

THE PRODIGALS

RUTH CAMPBELL IS A MEMBER OF COVENANT CHURCH, NEWMILNS, AND A SONGWRITER. One of her most recent compositions is called 'The Prodigals'. Ruth says, 'I wrote *The Prodigals* recently as I felt so burdened for people who grew up in the church, who know the truth and have wandered away. Nothing we do and nowhere we go is too far for God to forgive and reach us.'

'In a sense, we are all prodigals — who wander away. We have a Heavenly Father who loves us and longs for us to come home and be right with him. "*The Prodigals*" is a heart-breaking prayer for the lost to be found.'

'My own earnest prayer is that the prodigals will come home, and it challenges you and me to keep praying and pleading with the Lord. We have an amazing God — nothing is impossible for him.'

Ruth's song is currently being played on Revival FM. You can watch her perform it on YouTube by searching 'The Prodigals Ruth Campbell' or with the URL: bit.ly/ProdigalsSong ●



MINISTER HELPS TELL JOHN WYCLIFFE STORY IN NEW DOCUFILM

FOLLOWING ON FROM THEIR AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARY ON JOHN KNOX, PRODUCTION COMPANY TRINITY DIGITAL ARE EMBARKING ON THEIR NEXT MAJOR FEATURE. *Morningstar* looks at the life and legacy of John Wycliffe, the man behind the first full translation of the Bible into English.

As a grass-roots production company without the backing of a major studio or broadcaster, they are reliant on the enthusiasm and financial support of the Christian community. Over the last few months, they have successfully raised over half the funds for the film, and are now embarking on a crowdfunding campaign to gather another key portion of their budget.

Living 150 years before Martin Luther, John Wycliffe has been called the 'Morning Star of the Reformation'. He and his followers foreshadowed both the religious revolution that was to come and the spiritual revival that accompanied it. It was Wycliffe's focus on the Bible that formed the basis for all he did and taught. That focus remains both a challenge and an inspiration for us today.

Blending elements of both drama and documentary, *Morningstar* will bring the gripping story and radical thought of John Wycliffe to a wide, contemporary audience. The film incorporates interviews with key

experts including Smithton Free Church Associate Minister Rev. Dr Ian Hamilton.

Murdo Macleod, director of *Morningstar*, said, 'Very often, Christians see their faith only in terms of the New Testament age and the present. The intervening two thousand years are seen as quite irrelevant. Yet the long chain of saints and stories that connects us, generation by generation, right back to the apostles is anything but boring.'

'It is not only an epic saga in its own right, but it helps to ground and contextualise our own Christian experience. We are not living as Christians in a vacuum. There is a path along which we can look back past Billy Graham and William Wilberforce to Whitfield, Luther, Aquinas, Augustine, Paul and ultimately Jesus himself. We ourselves are becoming part of that story.'

'Through films like *Morningstar*, we aim to shine a light on Christians of the past and provide illumination into our own Christian lives in the present.'

The film is due for release in late 2021. Trinity Digital's campaign runs until the 23rd November and can be found at: indiegogo.com/projects/morningstar-john-wycliffe ●

NEW CHURCH PLANTING DIRECTOR APPOINTED

THE MISSION BOARD WAS PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE THE APPOINTMENT OF REV. NEIL MACMILLAN AS THE NEW CHURCH PLANTING DIRECTOR FOR THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND.

Neil is currently the senior minister of Cornerstone, a church plant in Edinburgh's Morningside. He will serve the Mission Board alongside his responsibilities to the congregation.

The main focus of the role is to oversee the Mission Board's goal to plant 30 new churches by 2030. To achieve this 30/30 vision, Neil will be focusing his energy and experience to initiate and oversee the recruitment, assessment, training, coaching, and deployment of church planters, as well as fundraising for church plants.

Commenting on his appointment, Neil said,

'Planting new churches is a vital part of our mission in secular Scotland. As we sustain and nourish existing congregations, the gospel also drives us outwards to new places and new people.

'I am still the minister of Cornerstone, and so leading the Free Church's drive to plant 30 new churches by 2030 is a daunting but exciting challenge for me. I am looking forward to seeing new congregations being planted all over Scotland — Highland and Lowland, East Coast and West Coast, in places of plenty and communities suffering great deprivation.

'The most important element of this challenge is prayer — please pray for a movement of God's Spirit in our nation so that we can do all this and much more.' ●

FURTHER RESPONSE TO THE HATE CRIME AND PUBLIC ORDER BILL

ON THE 23RD JULY 2020 THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND SUBMITTED OUR RESPONSE TO THE CALL FOR VIEWS FROM THE JUSTICE COMMITTEE OF THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT IN RELATION TO THE HATE CRIME AND PUBLIC ORDER (SCOTLAND) BILL.

We note that in opposing certain key aspects of the Bill we are joined by a diverse range of bodies including the National Secular Society, the Peter Tatchell Foundation, the Catholic Church, the Faculty of Advocates, the Law Society of Scotland and the Scottish Police Federation.

One of the issues we raised in our response to the Bill was the fact that the proposed new offence of 'stirring up hatred' did not require that the perpetrator intended to commit the offence. Accordingly, the offence could be committed unwittingly by someone who had no intention at all of stirring up hatred. We therefore welcome the announcement by the Justice Secretary, Humza Yousaf, on the 23rd September 2020 that a requirement that the perpetrator 'intended' to stir up hatred would be introduced into the Bill.

However, whilst recognising that requiring an intention to stir up hatred is an improvement, we note that 'intention' is a legal test and that the courts can take into account the full facts and circumstances to infer intention. This means that although the person may never have 'intended' – in the everyday sense

of the word – to stir up hatred, the Court might infer from the circumstances that he or she did so intend. This will, therefore, continue to have a chilling effect on free speech. The nature of the offence is still too vague and it is too easy for someone to fall foul of the legislation simply by disagreeing with someone else's opinion. The proposed offence will drive debate and discussion underground and be dangerous for our civil society in the long run.

We also continue to remain concerned about other aspects of the bill, including the offence of possessing inflammatory material.

In conclusion, despite the Justice Secretary's concession, we still believe Part 2 of the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill is at best unnecessary and ultimately has the potential to seriously undermine our democratic and liberal society by dampening free speech. Too many people automatically view disagreement as hatred rather than engaging in civilised debate over differing opinions. We want to encourage genuine debate and discussion in our society and that will not be achieved by criminalising perceived hatred.

As the Free Church of Scotland we have an interest in promoting debate and discussion. We believe that this is not only in the interests of Christians but is in the interests of society as a whole. ●

FREE CHURCH YOUTH CAMPS UPDATE

BY **KIRSTEN MACDONALD (CAMPS ADMINISTRATOR)**

I F YOU POPPED IN TO THE FREE CHURCH OFFICES ON THE MOUND IN NOVEMBER OF ANY OTHER YEAR, YOU'D PROBABLY FIND THE CAMPS COORDINATOR SITTING AT THE COMPUTER LOOKING OVER DESIGNS AND BLURBS AND FINAL DRAFTS FROM THE DESIGNER OF THE FCYC BROCHURE FOR THE FOLLOWING YEAR. If you dropped by at the start of December, you'd be handed an envelope and asked to pack some brochures ready for posting! But this year, in true 2020 style, things are a little different...

FCYC have made the decision not to print any brochures this year. Instead, they're working behind the scenes to get the FCYC website ready for a slightly later launch than usual. In the meantime, they're keeping the coronavirus situation and its impact on camps under review. Their plan is to work with the other boards in the church, taking

the best available advice, and to come to a decision by the end of January on whether they think camps will be able to go ahead in summer 2021.

If camps are going ahead, bookings will open at the end of January, when they'll also launch the website update with all the information you need to know about FCYC 2021! The Allocation Day will take place at the end of February. It'll be an exciting year, with two new camps on offer as well as plenty of the classics!

Please pray for wisdom and discernment for those who are making difficult decisions in the midst of so much uncertainty, and give thanks that in all of this, God has a plan.

You can keep up to date via the FCYC website (freechurchoyouthcamps.org) and the FCYC social media channels (@fcyouthcamps) ●

ZOOMING INTO A NEW YEAR

BY **FIONA MACASKILL**

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT, BACK ON THOSE DARK EVENINGS IN MARCH, THAT WE WOULD BE BEING ENCOURAGED TO CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS VIRTUALLY AND THAT ZOOM WOULD HAVE AN ADDITIONAL ENTRY IN THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY? Yet that is exactly where we are, and 'zooming' is no longer an activity reserved for rockets and small children on bikes. People of all ages around the church have been embracing this new way of meeting and communicating, and we would like to share a couple of the ways in which our Embracing the World project is moving forward through this means. At the time of going to press, Ferintosh and Resolis Church were planning a 'garage sale' by appointment! We look forward to hearing about how this novel idea works out. Many groups have also been meeting on Zoom and some of our committee members have been 'along' to share more detail about the people and groups we are supporting this year. If this is something you would like for your group, please get in touch with us through the website. One of the organisations for which we are raising funds this year is Scripture Union's schools work in Scotland. In association with SU Ireland, they have developed a resource called 'Light up Christmas', which they are offering to schools around the country to use

in assemblies and Christmas lessons. The resource comes with full lesson plans which are tied in to the curriculum. If you would like more information on this, have a look on the SU Scotland website. Please consider getting in touch with your local primary school to see if they would be interested in this resource.

Many of you will have seen the video in our project launch of Dr Ujjwal Hembron, the Superintendent at Purulia, the Leprosy Mission hospital. Sadly, he passed away at the start of October from complications due to COVID-19. He had been in hospital for about a month, and must have been admitted just a few days after recording the video for WfM. Please pray for his wife and two children – his daughter is also a doctor at Purulia. Pray too for the rest of the staff at Purulia and his colleagues across India.

We would appreciate prayer that events planned for this year's project would not only bring in funds but also testify to God's goodness and care. As this year comes to an end and we remember the Saviour who came down to earth for us, we pray that you will know God's arms embracing you and holding you close and that you would know the strength that is yours in Christ Jesus. ●



REFORMATIONUK'S EVANGELISM CONFERENCE: FOR THE CRISIS WE FACE

BY **BENJAMIN MITCHELL**



INTRODUCING A VIBRANT TALK ON PERSONAL EVANGELISM AT THIS YEAR'S REFORMATIONUK CONFERENCE, CHURCH-PLANTING MINISTER REV. ANDY YOUNG SUMMED UP THE CRISIS WE FACE: 'Europe is the only continent in the world where the church is receding'. How can we reach family, friends and neighbours with the glorious gospel – those who have 'no hope and are without God' (Ephesians 2:12)? We know that few will enter a church; many will only hear the Lord Jesus' name as a swear word. Truly we face a crisis that must be addressed urgently.

'Launch out into the deep'

To stir us into action, Rev. Geoff Thomas, pastor of more than 50 years, fittingly opened the conference by speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ's miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5). Here the Lord had directed seasoned fishermen – who had caught nothing all night – to simply '*launch out into the deep*'. To be successful fishers of men in this crisis nothing is needed more than to take Christ at his word.

'Every talk was...full of biblical truth, practical wisdom'

Led by the principles found in the Word of God, Revs David Strain, Bill Schweitzer, Dan Peters, and Donald John Maclean gave particularly edifying conference addresses. Other conference speakers included Matthew Roberts (IPC), Peter Naylor and Andy Young (EPCEW).

The speakers addressed topics including prayerful dependence on God, evangelistic preaching, personal evangelism, and youth work. The conference sought to answer the vital questions: 'What is the Gospel?', 'What is evangelism?', and 'How do we evangelise?'

Attendee Rev. Douglas McCallum – minister of Cambridge Presbyterian Church – said: 'I was hugely blessed by this year's Evangelism conference. Every talk was of a very high quality – full of Biblical truth, practical wisdom, and an appropriate level of challenge. The fellowship was a real encouragement...I am already looking forward to the conference in 2021.'

Highlights

Rev. Dr Bill Schweitzer, speaking on 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, reminded us that the Gospel is not just any good news – it is the Gospel of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, and has eternal consequences. He also showed us, from Revelation 14:6, that the Gospel is a noun as well as a verb and needs to be a proclaimed; the apostle John saw an angel 'having the

eternal gospel to gospel'. Andy Young then gave two stirring addresses on preaching and presenting Christ, the One who is '*chief among ten thousand*' (Song of Solomon 5:10). It dovetailed well with Dan Peters' talk on evangelistic preaching, which encouraged ministers to be exegetical, yet enterprising, preachers. Donald John Maclean spoke on the free offer of the Gospel, noting that it is an invitation from the Lord Jesus himself: a pleading and a promise to be offered to all freely (Isaiah 51:5). Peter Naylor then spoke on the necessity of teaching the young people God has entrusted to our care. He reiterated that what a person learns first will be the last thing they lose, and if we do not teach our young people then others will. Therefore practical advice was given on how to perform the important task of catechising our children.

Of course, all these tasks are only possible by God's grace. Rev. David Strain's talk on 'prayerful dependence on the sovereign God' undergirded much of what was said by other conference speakers. His very insightful talk on 'Today's False Gospels' – therapeutic, reactionary, and social – left delegates thankful for Christ's work on the cross, which deals with the heart of the problem: the human heart.

'I loved being there'

One delegate, Liam, commented: 'The conference was an exceptional time of Christian fellowship, alongside solid reformed teaching, with a real emphasis on the glory of God as revealed in the Gospel. I loved being there and very much look forward to attending next year!'

At the end of the conference Jonathan Winch, Executive Director of Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary, concluded, 'It's great that hundreds joined us, online and in person from across four continents. The challenge now is to "launch out into the deep" with this good news. The cross of Christ is the only answer to the crisis of our time.' ●

The conference was hosted by Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary, based in Newcastle, England. Conference addresses can be freely viewed online via their YouTube channel: [youtube.com/WestminsterPresbyterianTheologicalSeminaryUK](https://www.youtube.com/WestminsterPresbyterianTheologicalSeminaryUK)

Benjamin Mitchell is Development Officer at Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

DEC/JAN 2021 PRAYER DIARY

**'Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus'**

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Mon 7th Pray for all students coming to the end of an unusual term as they face assessments and deadlines.

Tues 8th Pray for our friends and family who are not Christians – seek time and commitment to invest in friendships and a love for sharing the truths of the Gospel to people.

Wed 9th Pray for all those who have been victims of domestic abuse, especially through lockdown. Ask that they will find refuge.

Thurs 10th Today is Human Rights Day. Pray for all those who have had basic human rights taken away and have no freedom of speech.

Fri 11th Pray for all those who have suffered loss through Covid-19 as many have not been able to grieve in the usual way. Pray they will know the peace that comes from the Lord.

Sat 12th Pray for the small congregation in Greenock as they give thanks for their refurbished building and seek to witness in what has been designated as the most deprived area in Scotland.

Sun 13th Pray for the Garrabost congregation and Rev. Andrew Coghill as they look for a settled ministry in that community.

Mon 14th As winter sets in, pray for all those who are living on the streets and for the organisations who try to help them with food and blankets.

Tues 15th Pray for our governments in Westminster and Edinburgh, for wisdom as they lead the nation. Give thanks for Christian politicians and the helpful impact they have in shaping the laws of the nation.

Wed 16th Mission International is finding some difficulty in getting funds to where they need to be. Pray that the restrictions on bona fide organisations helping the poor do not suffer due to the wrongful use of these services.

Thurs 17th Pray for refugees who have fled countries like Syria and Iraq. Give thanks that Jordan has welcomed many and the Bible Society has helped local churches to provide for their basic needs.

Fri 18th On International Migrants Day, pray that all those who have settled in our country would be given the opportunity to live good lives.

Sat 19th Pray with 20schemes that our lives will be a witness to those around us, and that we will keep seeking to share the gospel clearly and boldly with the lost in our community.

Sun 20th Remember our brothers and sisters in the North American Presbytery, especially Rev. Kent Compton and Rev. Peter Aitken as they serve the congregations there.

Mon 21st Give thanks for the many shoeboxes that were filled and are now on their way to bring joy and blessing to those who receive them. Pray for the continuing work of Blythswood.

Tues 22nd Pray for teachers, social workers, doctors, and lawyers who have positions of authority and responsibility, that they would use their positions to have a positive influence on people's lives.

Wed 23rd The BIG meal provides a slap-up Christmas meal for needy children in the developing world in 16 different countries. Pray as they plan a 'Covid Special' focus this year due to the pandemic which has affected all of our lives, in particular those in the developing world.

Thurs 24th In previous years many congregations held carol services as a form of outreach and witness. Pray that while we are unable to sing, we will do what we can to praise our Saviour.

Fri 25th On Christmas morning let us give praise and thanks to our Father in Heaven, who loved us so much that he sent his Son to save us.

Sat 26th Pray with the Coatbridge and Cumbernauld congregations as they look into the possibility of a church planter in Chapelhall, a rapidly growing town on M8 corridor.

Sun 27th Remember the congregation meeting in Grace Church Montrose and their interim moderator, Rev. Alberto de Paula, as they witness in that town.

Mon 28th Pray for the Portree and Bracadale congregation as they continue to raise funds for their new building. Pray there would be no more delays in the process.

Tues 29th Pray for those who are being persecuted for their faith, that they would know God's love and peace. Give thanks for the witness of the persecuted church and for the way God continues to build his church in the most unlikely places.

Wed 30th Give thanks with the congregation in Dunblane that they hope to have a five-year ministry plan in place soon. Pray for their continued witness in the town.

Thurs 31st As 2020 comes to a close, let us draw closer to God and give thanks for all his goodness to us. Let us pray that we are willing to learn from all the experiences of this past year.

Fri 1st At the beginning of a New Year, let us commit all that we have and all that we are into our Lord's loving care and resolve to spend more time learning from him.

Sat 2nd Pray for the congregation in Tain as they continue to raise funds for their new church.

Sun 3rd Pray for the congregation in the university city of Aberdeen as they and their interim moderator, Rev. Iver Martin, look to the Lord for guidance for their future pastor.

Mon 4th Pray for local opportunities to share the gospel and for ways to work together for the Christian good of Scotland.

Tues 5th Pray for the peace of Israel, for the Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities, and for every effort to share the Gospel.

Wed 6th Pray for men and women to be rooted in God's Word and equipped to share it with others. Especially remember Edinburgh Theological Seminary, that more students would come forward to train for ministry and mission.

Prayer requests to: ian.macdonald57@btinternet.com.

Please take time to send requests for your congregation or ministry to be included in forthcoming Records. These prayer notes are prepared 5 weeks in advance of publication.

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. JOHN ANGUS MACLEOD

FOR OVER 20 YEARS, PROF. JOHN ANGUS MACLEOD HAS BEEN TEACHING NEW TESTAMENT AT ETS. This month we interviewed him to find out more about his life and work at the Seminary over these past two decades.

Please tell us a little about your life and ministry prior to coming to ETS.

I was brought up in the tip of the diamond-shaped Island – Lewis. It was a genuinely idyllic upbringing. I was challenged by the ministry of Rev. Angus Smith, who loved to preach the gospel to us all.

Having left home at 15, I worked as a Commissioning Engineer with Plessey Telecommunications, where I developed my interest in all things technological – which helped a lot once I came to ETS.

Once converted in Invergordon, while in conversation with my sister and her husband, I longed to join the Lord's people at the Lord's table and did so a few months later. Within a year, I felt the call of the Lord to devote my life to the ministry of the Word of God and prayer.

Of course, this meant that I had to go back and gain academic qualifications to allow me to enter the University of Aberdeen. The next eight years were marked by study for Highers, for my honours degree, and three happy years at the Free Church College. It was during those eight years that I was given the gift of the wife of my youth, Elizabeth, who had been nursing in Aberdeen, and together we began to raise our family of six children.

I entered the ordained ministry of the Free Church with my induction to Dingwall Free Church in 1989, and remained there for ten years till my appointment to the New Testament chair at the Free Church College in 1999.

How did you feel when you were called to the Free Church College (now ETS)?

I felt sad, humbled and excited. Sad, because I was leaving a people whom I loved, prayed for and wept over in Dingwall. Humbled, because I knew that there were others who were more suited to this than I was. And excited, because I had a passionate desire to shape the minds of those

who were entering ministry and mission with the magnificent glory of biblical truth.

What are the similarities and differences between ministering in a congregation and ministering at the Seminary?

In my view, both of them are callings from God, recognised by the church. I see myself as a missionary first and foremost, willing to do whatever behind the scenes to ensure that ETS can be best placed to serve the church of God as it declares the gospel of God.

At ETS, one is still a pastor over the students, and that is a substantial part of the work – ensuring that students are shaped in their character as well as in their minds during their training.

Still, I remember the distinct loss of prayer support when I came to serve in the College. At Dingwall, I felt the people's affection, and heard many of them in prayer, supporting the ministry there. It felt different at the College. We prayed for one another, and no doubt we were prayed for by folks in the church, but not many would let you know this. I guess we were not seen as missionaries on the 'field'.

Looking back over the past two decades, how has teaching at ETS changed?

In 1999, I joined a lovely team of colleagues who shaped me as the youngest member of the Senate. They were very gracious to me. In time, I was given freedom to accelerate the technological shape of the College's life and teaching, ensuring that it was ready for serving the church in the 21st century. Over the years we have digitised the library, developed online resources for students and, most recently, we have installed distance learning facilities. I have enjoyed helping with the technical side of all these developments.

Furthermore, while what we teach at ETS has not changed, we have had the benefit of the

same material being recognised as a Degree by the University of Glasgow. The fact that we can deliver this by distance learning technology to a worldwide class of students is thrilling, though not without its challenges.

Which aspects of your calling do you enjoy the most?

I certainly enjoy teaching, enthusing students with a passion for New Testament, Presbyterian Church Principles and Practice, and organising and teaching on the Saturday Course. The latter has been a wonderful way of bringing ETS to the hearts and minds of a wide range of Christians in a wonderful variety of churches. Yet, the pastoral side of the work, while not always the most enjoyable, is that for which I constantly feel accountable before God, in particular.

Why does ETS remain important for the Free Church and for the wider Church?

ETS is a rather unique institution. It is a relatively small, very Scottish seminary, supported by a rather small, robust Presbyterian denomination that insists on a reformed, biblical, theological education in line with the Westminster Standards for its own students; and it is willing to pay hundreds of thousands of pounds to ensure that other churches in Scotland, the UK and the world

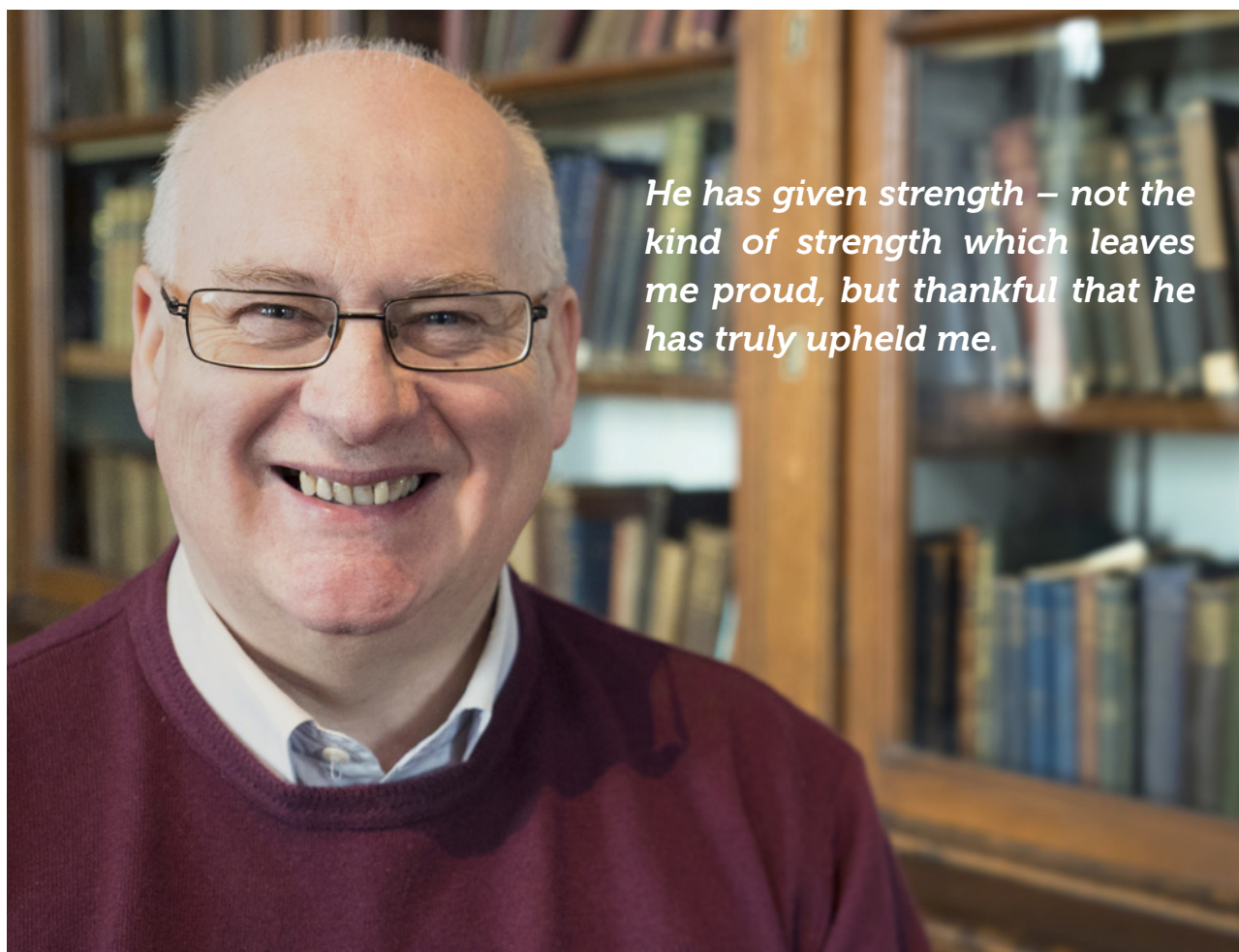
can have the same formative teaching for their ministers and missionaries. The Free Church of Scotland has done so much in this regard, and we should all be thankful to God for this amazing ministry and for the wonderful generosity shown by so many in supporting this mission. The addition of the new Centre for Mission at ETS crowns this work.

In what ways do you feel God has helped you with your work over these past two decades?

He has given strength according to his promise to fulfil the ministry to which he appointed me, not the kind of strength which leaves me proud, but thankful, thankful that he has truly upheld me in all the teaching, administration, technological support and pastoral care.

He also provided teaching colleagues, each of whom has a heart for his purposes. Without them, my work would be impossible.

And, behind the scenes, he has endowed ETS with amazing office administrative and support staff. These are the only ETS names that I will include in this article: Christina Maciver, Anne Macleod, Joan MacLennan, Heather Watson, Ruth Smith, John Scoales, Colin Morrison, Byron Goodwin and Ewan Smith. Without people like these, there would be no ETS that would fulfil its mission in the 21st century. ●





'Tis the SEASON to be HOLY!

DAYSPRING MACLEOD gets ready for
the best Christmas ever!

HAVE YOU READ DR SEUSS' CLASSIC EPIC POEM? I speak of course of *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. The antisocial Grinch so hates Christmas (after all, his heart is two sizes too small) that he creeps into the nearby cheery town of Who-Ville on Christmas Eve, disguised as Santa, and steals all the Christmas trees, decorations, gifts, and food so that the Whos will be as miserable as he is. But famously, as the sun rises and the Grinch listens for the sound of wails from the village below, he hears singing instead.

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

In the book and movies, it's clear that the 'little bit more' is the love within families and community — that's the thing that the Grinch is missing. Christmas, it turns out, is predicated not on presents but on love.

Christmas 2020 turns this ending somewhat on its head — we can have any number of presents, thanks to online shopping, but meeting together with family and friends will be severely curtailed. Our love and greetings will be sent primarily via post and Zoom. The warm hugs of our loved ones is a hole not adequately filled by any number of Amazon boxes. Nevertheless, the Church can still be a witness to those despondent and lonely onlookers who see nothing to rejoice in this Christmas. I suggest, like the Whos, we sing.

It's no exaggeration to say that Christmas music is one of my favourite genres. I sing my daughter to sleep with *Silent Night* all year round. Listening to my festive playlist is now, as it was in my childhood, one of the highlights of the whole season. And as I write this now, in early November, already I can't get my mind off my favourite Christmas hymn. I find myself singing *O Holy Night* throughout the day: in the car, while cooking dinner, getting ready for bed. But I am always drawn back to the same line.

*A thrill of hope — the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!*

Isn't that wonderful? Is there anything this year needs more than a thrill of hope? I'm not being overly holy when I say that this year I'm looking forward to dedicating more thought than usual to the extravagant grace of God in sending his Son in human form. We are so very weary, after nine months of restrictions and anxieties and isolation. We are so in need of a new and glorious morn — a new start that the mere turning over of the calendar to 2021 cannot offer us. We need an eternity of mental and spiritual rest. We need that thrill of hope.

Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices...

I can never sing this line to my satisfaction. No one can, without actually falling on their knees! We should be bowled over every time we look to grasp the truth of Jesus' birth, the utter humility of the only true Servant of God. And the angels, oh, how amazing that they sang the birth of the Saviour without any hint of the dread and darkness of his death, though it was always his purpose. In that moment, God's desire was to bring all who would listen into his joy and perfect pleasure with his Son — that men should worship him in a new way, face to face, through unspeakable faith that this poverty-born baby in a shed should somehow turn out to be the Messiah promised by the prophets for millennia. It would not be known to them for thirty-three more years that the child's kingdom would be through the gateway of brutal death; yet his glory would infinitely surpass anything that the shepherds might have expected out of an earthly kingdom.

Those of us who know Jesus will no doubt respond to these words with love and awe at the humility and beauty of our Saviour. Will our joy in him overflow into bringing others to adore him? I hope so. Take a step backward in the hymn.

Long lay the world, in sin and error pining, till he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.

We know all too well what that is like, don't we? To pine in our sin and error, to feel utterly worthless? Even as Christians, we are so familiar with this despair when we take our eyes off of Christ. Let us see those around us, those who are sometimes unattractive and aggressive and insolent with their sin, with the eyes of One who came to serve and save them. So often we see the non-believing world as the enemy. They are not the enemy — no, not even the ones who hate Christians and mock us and campaign against us. They are souls just like us who are sitting in a dungeon, captives, with not even a dream of a key — and we used to be sitting there right next to them! How can we want to push them down further into the darkness, instead of taking their chained hands and gently leading them toward freedom?

Now, freedom is not found at the manger. It is found at the cross, and at the empty tomb. Yet Jesus' very birth does begin to show us the 'worth' of our souls: by taking humanity upon himself, our God dignified all of humanity. We are of the same stuff as our King. He became like us so that we could become like him.

The birth is only the start of Jesus' work of redemption, but it brings us back to where we started, *a thrill of hope*. Hope is a taste of greater things, of satisfaction. It leads us and goads us to keep going so that we may reach our goal. This year, may hope help us continue on our journey, and may we use hope to start others on theirs.

Bring on Christmas 2020. No carol services, no parties, no festive market, no Santa's grotto. Grim? Not at all. I'm ready to rejoice! ●

Now, freedom is not found at the manger. It is found at the cross, and at the empty tomb.



'Give me this mountain'

Joshua 14:12

THE MOUNTAINEERING SOCIETY

BY **PETER MORRISON**

EIGHTY! YOU CAN'T BE EIGHTY! It was a sort of compliment, and that was over a year ago, but it did sting a little. There were the signs – in the previous year we had had more NHS appointments (all excellent) than in the previous twenty. Then there were the other signs. Waking with the lark, creaking joints, the hearing aid, worrying about things that never caused us concern earlier. And then it was the first year in twenty that we did not swim in Loch Lomond. Then there is the state of the world. How things have changed!

In the new COVID age things have just intensified. Being told repeatedly that you are in the most vulnerable category can do nothing for one's confidence. There is loving concern, but how could one dream that such concern would be verging on irritation? Apparently with little role one can falsely slip into the position of having nothing to offer.

Old age could sort of get you down, but it must not. What should one do? Start going to a gym? Take up yoga? Join a men's shed group? Or the female equivalent? All superficial, just Elastoplast when something deeper needs to be seen to. Does one need to re-purpose one's life? Indeed, no! The foundations remain. The purposes of life are unchanged. We are guided by the same principles.

OCTOGENARIAN CONQUEROR

There's a spectacular, defiant example in the Bible of what to do in old age. It is not a model of merely coping. It is a model of vision, purpose and future achievement. It is recorded in Joshua chapter 14.

Caleb was eighty-five and still going strong. He had a long history of service. He was one of the spies sent to the Promised Land, and he brought back a positive report. He was an optimist with a well-founded optimism. He saw beyond the problems and challenges to the possibilities. He knew where his strength came from and he knew that, in God's strength, his people would overcome. He had the qualities to succeed, but no formal qualifications.

Forty-five years previously, when he had gone out as a spy, Caleb had followed Moses' precise instructions (Numbers 13). The spies were told: Go into the hill country – you get a better view from there. See if the people are weak or strong, few or many. Check out the kind of land they live in. Are the towns walled? Is the soil fertile or poor? How much afforestation is there?

Today he – and Moses – would have needed a degree in land management. But without paper qualifications he evaluated the situation, produced an accurate report and brought back samples of what the land could supply. Upon his return, he contradicted the doubts of the other spies, arguing that the Israelites could conquer the land. His loyalty was commended by God (Numbers 14:24).

More than four decades on, Caleb was taking up another challenge. What was the challenge? Joshua had led the people into the Promised Land. But there was land still to be taken. Among it was the portion Moses had assigned Caleb as his inheritance because he had followed the Lord. It was not a lush plain, but a mountain. Mount Hebron was Anakim territory and boasted fortified cities. It seems that nobody else wanted to take up the challenge of claiming a land whose people were no doubt a threat to their neighbours.

But Caleb told Joshua, *'I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then, for war and for going and coming. So now give me this hill country of which the Lord spoke on that day...It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall drive them out just as the Lord said'* (Joshua 14:11-12).

Joshua granted his plea. Caleb acted. With God's help, he took the land. The story ends with a concise summing up: *'And the land had rest from war'* (Joshua 14:15). What an achievement.

JOIN THE MOUNTAINEERS

Caleb matters to those of us dealing with old age today. Basically, he tells me, don't be put off, keep going. Even he had to defend his position as an old man. Even in those days there were low expectations of old folk.

Don't be put off when ageism rears its head where you would not expect it, nor when discouragement comes. The church should be a place where everyone's views are respected, but we can be told, if we belong to a certain demographic, that our opinions might lack understanding. Strangely, this does not come from the young folk but the in-betweens. Young folk are so often the source of encouragement.

The state of society is a cause of concern. But, the greater the concerns about society, the greater the need for service. When jobs are left undone, perhaps, with all your lengthy experience, you are the best person to take them up. If you feel useless, know that the most important form of service is the unseen kindness of a listening ear, an encouraging word and help with basic tasks. Don't hold back. You may have no idea of the impact of your actions. Remember Jesus' promise to those who give *'a cup of cold water'* in Matthew 10:42.

Joining Caleb in the Mountaineering Society has certain requirements. Feeling worthy of membership is not one of them. **God**, who has brought thus far, must be our reliance. **Grace**, not grumpiness, should mark us out. Be an encourager. We should remember that **good equipping** comes from our longer experience. Those of us who can look back on years of walking with the Lord know that it is he who gives us the **guts** to keep going. A vision essential for the **growth** of the Kingdom bears no relation to age. We can confidently embrace new ideas. They are probably rehashed old ones anyway. *'What has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun'* (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

This is the ultimate **'5G'** network and you don't need a multifunction mobile – in some places known as a *'handy'* – just take the hand of God.

The assurance for those of any age who hope in the Lord comes from Isaiah 40:31.

'Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.'

We are all getting older at the same pace. But the path grows brighter day by day if we are right with God, shining ever brighter until the perfect day (Proverbs 4:18).

God grant that, regardless of age, we are all on that path. ●

Peter Morrison is an elder at Glasgow City Free Church

'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him...

1 Corinthians 2:9

THE MOST IMPORTANT FEATURE OF WHAT GOD HAS PREPARED RELATES TO THE LORD JESUS. Being in his immediate presence will be the best part of our after-death experience. Even prior to our resurrection that will be true. But Jesus has a resurrected body and in eternity we will have as well.

Commenting on verses in Paul's resurrection chapter (1 Corinthians 15), NT Wright says that the key to understanding these verses is to realise that they are built on the foundation of Genesis 1 and 2. Understanding our future resurrected experience starts with an appreciation of the creativity of God. Psalm 19 draws attention to two aids that help us: this beautiful earth and the Bible.

Science helps us to appreciate just how amazing God's creative mind is. Each scientific discovery points to the astonishing creative mind of God. I am sure many readers share my joy in music, in art and in the world of nature in which we live. The creativity of God is demonstrated all around us. Atheists presenting television programmes showing the wonders of nature make me 'laugh out loud' — they so eloquently speak of our creative God.

The resurrection of Jesus is sometimes described as God's greatest creative act. Donald Macleod writes regarding the body of the Lord Jesus, including the fact that it is the model for our resurrected bodies: '...it is the Omega-point of creation, into which God the Father, in adoring and wondering gratitude for the service rendered by his Son, has poured all his wisdom, power and creativity, striving to create something as beautiful in its own way as the obedience offered on Calvary.' Our future bodies will be powerful, not subject to illness or death, adapted to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Our environment will be similarly enhanced: *'The wolf will live with the lamb'* (Isaiah 11:6) and *'the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea'* (Habakkuk 2:14).

Many years ago writers struggled to describe how particles of dead bodies, dispersed in a million ways, could be gathered to produce a live body. DNA may not be how God deals with the miracle of resurrection. But it helps us to see that the 'impossible' task of identifying the physical make-up of billions of people is not quite as inconceivable as a previous generation thought.

Computers also help. How can God possibly know everything about everybody, even to the detail described by Jesus such as the number of hairs on our head? Computers hold unimaginable amounts of information. I am not suggesting that God uses a computer. But the concept of him knowing everything somehow is not now so difficult to grasp.

The Bible and all we know of this earth and the human body and intellect point to a new physical creation in eternity that will exceed our imagining. ●



PART 12
OUR FUTURE
RESURRECTION
EXPERIENCE

BY IAIN GILL

A series of short articles about Jesus' resurrection

WHY DID GOD RAISE JESUS FROM DEATH?

GREENOCK FREE CHURCH: SAVED FOR A PURPOSE

Providence, perseverance and prayer in Scotland's most deprived area

BY **REV. ALLAN SHEARER & JOANNA SHEARER**

'...and behold, [it] was burning with fire, and [it] was not consumed.'

Exodus 3:2

BETWEEN NOVEMBER 2018 AND MARCH 2019, WE HAD THE GREAT PRIVILEGE OF SERVING THE LORD IN GREENOCK FREE CHURCH. A small building in need of repair, hidden behind a large furniture warehouse (the former Greenock Gaelic Free Church building), with a few members. An onlooker, passer-by — or fireman — may have been inclined to think that the church was dead or was dying. They would be grossly mistaken. Within the draughty building was an incredible warmth: the undeniable warmth of the Lord's people who have a hunger for the Word of God and a heart for reaching out into the community with the Gospel. Since our time spent within the congregation and community of Greenock, we have come to a deeper understanding of three things: providence, perseverance and prayer.



Handing out invites to Christmas service (Allan and Joanna on RHS)

PROVIDENCE

In December 2018, the church held its first Christmas carol service. Members of the congregation diligently walked the streets surrounding the church handing out invitations, posting them through doors, and leaving them in businesses and the local shopping centre. It was a great time of encouragement, being able to speak to people in the community as they were invited to the service. One elderly lady walked a great distance that cold winter's night after seeing an advert the congregation had put in the local paper. For those who attended the service, it was a very special time: a time of worship and glory to our great God. Richard Hill, a

friend of the congregation who played the piano for the service, said: 'I really felt as if the Lord was amongst us that night...His power through the Holy Spirit blessed the evening for his glory and honour. I often wonder if God used that blessed evening to strengthen the fellowship and prepare them for tough times ahead...'



The night of the fire

Two weeks later the adjoining building was ablaze. It was completely destroyed by fire. Miraculously, although sharing a common wall, the Free Church building survived. Despite some costly damage, it was not consumed. One of the firemen said he could not believe how little damage was done. A member of the congregation said: 'We were devastated by the fire. It was difficult to comprehend why the church was still standing. I do believe the Lord saved us for a reason. It's a new beginning.'



The original building being demolished. The church remains intact!



The church just after the fire — with damage to adjoining wall

What seemed initially like a strange providence was soon to reveal just how much the Lord often 'moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform' (William Cowper). The formerly insurmountable renovation costs to repair the roof, upgrade the interior, and replace the carpets, were paid for by the insurers in covering the fire and water damage. Generous donations have also been made to the congregation to replace the windows and the ageing kitchen, ready for service. The previously dwarfed, hidden Free Church building is now seen fully from the road, with a car park due in place of the demolished warehouse. Press coverage at the time of the fire helped to make the church more widely known in the community. Now, despite the ever-present Coronavirus, the Greenock Free Church building is once again open for worship! *'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!'* (1 Corinthians 15:55-57; 1 Peter 1:3)



Greenock Free Church newly refurbished interior

PERSEVERANCE

The people of Greenock Free Church have soldiered on as a small remnant for twenty years without their own minister. They have suffered the sad loss of members and have seen their building ravaged by fire. Yet their perseverance is commendable and honouring to the

Lord. They seek to glorify God in worship and reach out to the community around them. It is striking that when Paul writes to the churches, he never makes reference to the number of people who attend. His emphasis is never on *quantity* but rather on the *quality* of our Christian lives. His letters are marked with encouragement. The congregation of Greenock Free Church are in need of our encouragement and prayers.



Greenock Free Church newly refurbished and open!

PRAYER

During our time spent within the congregation, prayer was — and remains — central to the life of the church. They have persisted in prayer for a settled ministry, local leadership and for the Lord to add to their number. Please join with the congregation in bringing these things before the Lord. Please pray, also, for Rev. Alasdair MacDonald, the interim moderator, as he faithfully and tirelessly continues to look after the congregation and the practical needs of the church.

Greenock, ranked the most deprived area in Scotland in January 2020, scores low for educational outcomes and employment and has a high number of drug-related hospital admissions. The community is in much need of the Good News of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. How wonderful to think that the Lord has saved and preserved a people and a church in the heart of that community! Through providence, and the perseverance and prayers of his people, it is exciting to think of the Lord working out his purposes and what he may bring about in the mission field of Greenock! ●

We would love to publish the stories of other Free Church congregations and share the encouragements that are to be found in the majesty of God's providence. Send your congregation's story to: editor@freechurch.org

Malachi: a voice in the wilderness

In the **This is my story** devotional series, **REV. DAVID J RANDALL** imagines how some of the Bible's characters might tell us their story. Some are not headline characters, but they all had a part to play in the great drama of God's plan, given to us in Scripture. Hebrews 11:4 says of one character, 'though he died, he still speaks'. May the stories of these Bible characters from yesterday help us today to trust, follow, love and serve the Character of the Bible.

LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT ME, REALLY. But that's okay, because it's not the messenger that matters but the message. That's what 'Malachi' means – *my messenger*. It's a strange name to have been given, but it does describe my mission – to be God's messenger. I've sometimes been called the last of the *minor* prophets, but my mission didn't seem very *minor* to me!

I lived in the fifth century BC, roughly contemporary with the better-known Ezra and Nehemiah, and I was called by God to be a prophet more than 400 years before some of the things I prophesied would come to pass.

So what is my message? You can easily read it for yourself – in the last pages of what you'll come to call the Old Testament (just 55 verses; I guess that's why I'm classed as a *minor* prophet).

After that, most Bibles (in English anyway) have a blank page, and that blank page represents about four centuries of waiting, until in the fulness of the times God himself will come into his world. *When I look forward*, I see a coming that will be sudden, unmistakeable, and also unwelcome to many because it will show up the ungodliness of fallen humanity and the futility of much that passes for religious practice.

But that coming will be good news for the world. God will send a kind of second Elijah to prepare the way, and then the long-expected Messiah will take on human flesh and will take action for the salvation of his people – not as a warrior king but as a suffering servant whose sacrifice will result in abundant life and eternal life for his people. That's what I see when I look forward.

When I look around me I see the kind of things that make his coming needful.

But before I tell you about that, let me tell you what I see *when I look back*. 538 BC was a wonderful year for our nation because King Cyrus of Persia issued the decree that allowed captive peoples to return to their own land. It was wonderful; it was an amazing gift of love after all the sin and apostasy that had led to the Babylonian exile. God came to our rescue; it was sheer, unadulterated, amazing grace.

Then there was the euphoria of returning and



rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Our joy seemed complete with the rebuilding and rededication of the temple. It was all wonderful. But have you heard the saying about the early dew of morning fading away by noon? As time went on, many people became disillusioned. We were surrounded by enemies. Sometimes there was drought, and life was tough. People were no longer thankful for God's deliverance, and I began to hear some cynical questions about whether he loves us at all.

And I'm afraid that as I *look around* I see many signs of ingratitude and even neglect of the Lord and his ways on the part of priests and people alike. Folk can be so fickle. When they're accused of despising the Lord, they act all innocent and ask, 'How have we despised your name?' Well, I'll tell you how. For the animal sacrifices, they look out the poorest animals they can find – blind or diseased. They would never get away with treating earthly rulers like that, yet they think anything is good enough to offer to God! I told people that if that's how they're going to treat God, they might as well close the doors of the temple – which didn't go down very well! Instead of real spiritual devotion, they just see worship as a wearisome duty to get through as quickly as possible. The priests should be leading faithfully, but they are leading people astray and the people gladly follow.

Other signs of their decline include family breakdown; callous maltreatment of hired workers, widows and orphans; and falling short in tithes and offerings. I have challenged people to bring the full tithe and see if God doesn't open the windows of heaven and pour blessings upon them. Giving is meant to be a token of love for the Lord and a desire to honour him in every part of life, but sad to say, they just bleat on about it being pointless to serve God.

These are the things I see as I look around me, and it's all so sad. After all the ways God has led them and blessed them on their way with countless gifts of love, they have forgotten him and gone into spiritual decline.

Thankfully there are some faithful people – those who fear the Lord and speak with one another about his truth and his ways. Their names are in God's book and he has promised they will be his treasured possession.

But the general picture is one of stagnation and decay. As I said, Malachi means *my messenger*, and all of this is my message. When I look back I see God's mercy and faithfulness, but when I look around I see

backsliding and spiritual decline.

Is there any hope? Indeed there is – but only because of God's infinite mercy and surpassing grace. He called me and sent me as his messenger, but there will come a time when he sends another Messenger. The Lord will suddenly come to his temple – but what will that coming mean for rebellious and ungodly people? How will they endure that day of his coming? Do they fondly imagine that they will be treated like teachers' pets? No, his coming won't be all sweetness and light. If he comes suddenly to his temple and finds things going on that should have no place there, he will act strongly to cleanse that temple. He may be meek and lowly in heart but he will also be like a refiner's fire.

However, I do have a hope that burns within my heart. The day of the Lord will come. It may be a long time before he sends Elijah as his fore-runner, but it will happen. And at the right time the Lord himself will descend from heaven. He will be both human and divine and he will come as the suffering servant of the Lord, the One prophesied by Isaiah as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And, in line with what Micah told us long ago, keep your eye on the little town of Bethlehem.

Whether people's failings and sins then will be like those of my day, the truth is that we have all gone astray, turning to our own ways. But the Lord will lay on him the iniquity of us all, and through this great Messenger of the covenant there will be a way of forgiveness and salvation for all who will turn to him in repentance and faith, and who will glory in his coming. Watch for that coming – with patience, with faith, with obedience, and with hope. ●

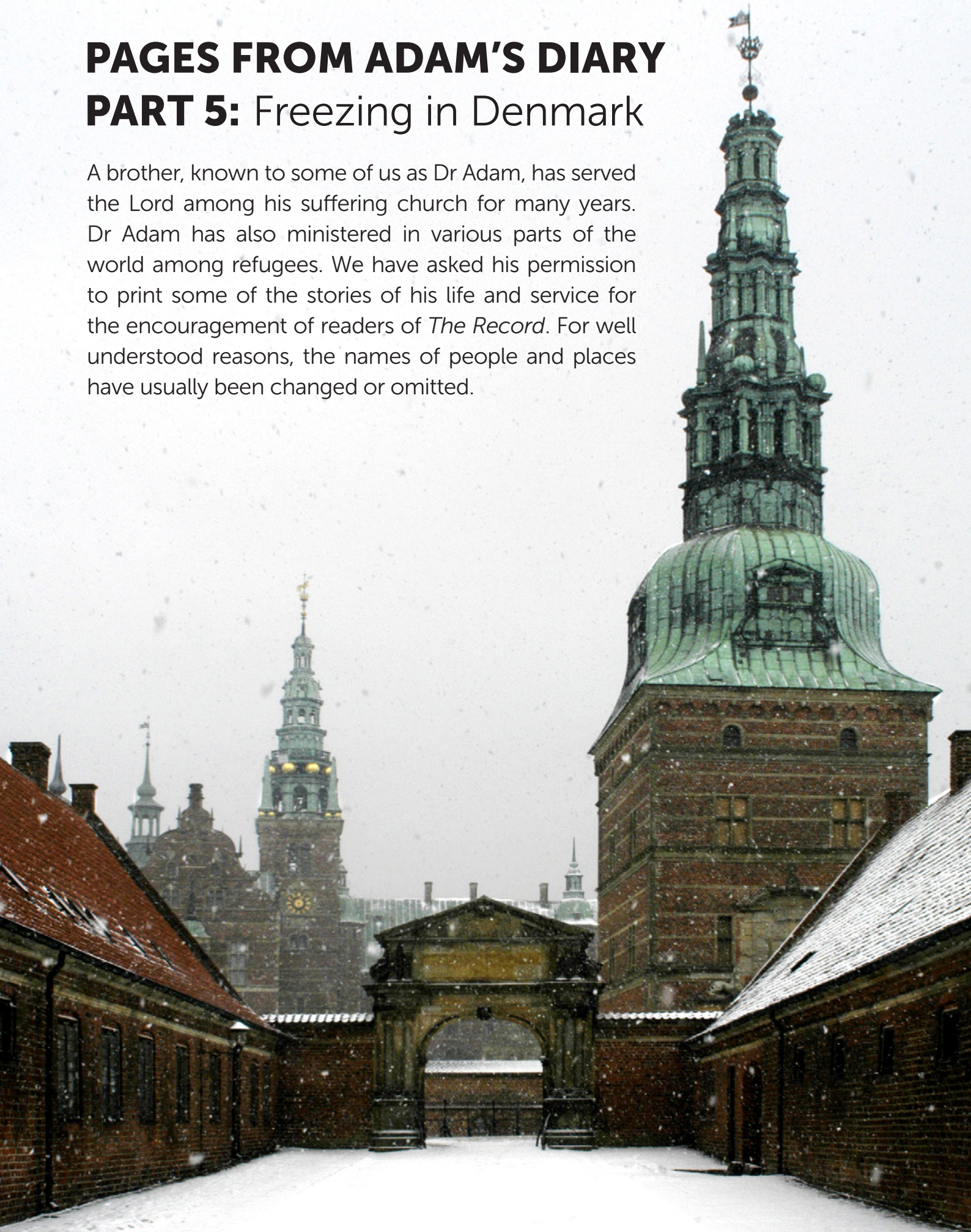
Rev. David J. Randall spent forty years in pastoral ministry before retiring. He has served as Chair of the Solas Centre for Public Christianity. He is the author of several books, including *Come and Behold Him: Christmas Through Different Eyes* (Christian Focus).



PAGES FROM ADAM'S DIARY

PART 5: Freezing in Denmark

A brother, known to some of us as Dr Adam, has served the Lord among his suffering church for many years. Dr Adam has also ministered in various parts of the world among refugees. We have asked his permission to print some of the stories of his life and service for the encouragement of readers of *The Record*. For well understood reasons, the names of people and places have usually been changed or omitted.



DURING THE YEARS I HAVE SERVED OUR SAVIOUR, ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS WHEN MY LIFE WAS IN GRAVE DANGER, HE DIRECTLY INTERVENED. One such incident happened some years ago when I was in Denmark visiting and ministering to a group of refugees. Among them were people who had come to faith earlier during my ministry in Greece. They had now migrated to Denmark where they were seeking asylum. They were in a refugee camp where they had introduced others to the Lord, and they asked if I could go and spend a few days with them.

SEEKING REFUGE

In the chaos and uncertainty of our world, millions of people are on the move. This migration of humanity is one of the most significant challenges of the 21st century. Most of the refugees I have met and served in the last twenty years are young people trying to make their way to Western Europe or, those more audacious, to North America. Some of these are refugees as a result of war, social and ethnic conflicts or political and religious persecution. However, the vast majority of them are simply fleeing poverty and oppression in regressive, repressive societies with little hope of change. These nations are often ruled by inept, corrupt governments who are nothing more than ruthless bands of gangsters and thieves looting their countries' wealth. Some of these societies are so bad that the simplest chores of daily life require bribing an official. There is no safety, no work, no health care, no education, and no hope for the future. But there is an abundance of despair.

With the advent of the worldwide web, people in these nations are able to see the magnificent European and American cities with their immaculate roads and manicured parks. They notice the freedom to think, to say, to choose. They see people beautifully dressed or just dressing as they wish, and so on and so forth. Consequently, they risk everything, even their lives, to reach this earthly paradise. Who among us in their shoes would not do the same?

On the other side of this grim equation are the nations of the world who collectively spend trillions of dollars each year to wage war, to protect themselves from those who want to wage war upon them or, far worse, instigate strife so they can sell weapons of war. In such a shameless and unrighteous world, what can we expect but upheaval and the production of refugees? In an ideal world, we would not support despots simply because they serve our national interests. In an ideal world, we would not stir up trouble to achieve our geopolitical and economic interests. In a righteous world, whatsoever we wish for ourselves, our children and our societies, we would also wish for others.

A portion of that which is spent on instruments of war could significantly improve the living conditions of people in left-behind societies and alleviate the suffering of many people. Perhaps it could even lessen this migratory impulse by bringing up their standard of living and giving them some hope. We might even have a safer world in which we all can live.

However, we are in this present darkness. Sin has so thoroughly and ruinously infected and corrupted the hearts of men that every inclination of their hearts is naturally toward selfishness. But we have the assurance of the return of that promised righteous ruler upon whose shoulder shall rest the government of this world (Isaiah 9:6-7). He shall rule with justice and purity, because righteousness is the belt of his waist and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb (Isaiah 11:1-9), and *'nations shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more'* (Isaiah 2:4). Howbeit, until then we shall continue to have this march of folly in our world where unrighteousness, mischief and wickedness are at large. In such a world, we will have refugees. These men and women want to have what we have—a better life for themselves and a better future for their children. They come to the West thinking they are reaching utopia, the attainment of all their dreams and aspirations. While they are among us, some of them meet the Saviour of whom they have not heard. They hear this timeless message, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the light of his face penetrates the darkness of their hearts.

THE JOURNEY

Such were the people to whom I was sent by the Lord to minister in Denmark. On this trip, I was taking with me a dear brother whom I had met many years earlier when I was



serving our Lord among refugees in Bulgaria. He was one of the asylum seekers who came to faith there. I will call him Joseph, but that is not his real name. What God has done through the life of this man, this former refugee, whose entire worldly possessions fit into a single suitcase, is astonishing – a very ordinary man whom God has used in very extraordinary ways. And since he is empty of himself, God alone rightfully has received the full credit and glory due him. I tell some of my European and American friends that ten missiologists with PhDs and a dozen mission organisations would not do what God has done through the life of this man. Since I met him (and he came to faith twenty years ago), thousands have heard the Gospel and thousands have come to faith as a result of his simple ministry. On this occasion, I took him with me because he had been to one of the camps we were planning to visit. This camp was in the northern frontiers of Denmark. He was going with me not only to act as my guide but especially to use this opportunity to be together and minister together. To get to this camp, we had to take an early morning train from Copenhagen north to Aalborg, a five- or six-hour journey. From Aalborg, we then had to take a bus three hours further north to a small town where we had to transfer to yet another bus which would take us to the camp. We had been told by our friends in the camp that the last bus would stop operating at 4pm.

We spent two days in Copenhagen with a refugee couple whom I had introduced to the Lord and Joseph had later wed them. They were both orphans. I shall tell you that story on another occasion. We ministered the Word of God in their home to other asylum seekers like themselves. At the end of the two days, we got up before dawn and made our way to the central train station. This was December, and by the time we arrived in Aalborg, there was a steady snowfall. We were delayed reaching Aalborg and, in our haste not to miss our bus, we boarded the wrong bus traveling in a completely different direction from where we needed to go. The windows had steamed up; it was snowing; we were talking and did not realise we were on the wrong bus going in the wrong direction. We were to arrive at our transfer point in three hours to catch the last bus going to the camp. However, after nearly five hours on the road at 5pm in the dark of the evening, the lady bus driver, whose English was not good and seemed quite apprehensive as to what these two foreign-looking male passengers were doing on her bus, announced, 'Final stop', then quickly dropped us off on the roadside, closed the door, scurried around and took off.

Right away, Joseph recognised that we were in the wrong place, but it was too late. Before we could stop the bus and get back on it, she drove away and no amount of waving got her attention. Joseph had taken this journey and remembered that at the place where we had to transfer buses to go to the camp, there was a school. The school had vanished because we were over one hundred kilometers from where we needed to be. Both of us were up to our knees in snow with our bags in our hands in the middle of what appeared to be a wilderness. There was nothing there other than open fields. In the distance, there were some lights. We had no choice but to walk in the dark across the fields to those distant lights.

Once we reached them, there was nothing there other than a couple of buildings and lamp posts. There were no human beings anywhere. Our hands and feet were numb from the cold. We tried to use our phones, but they were not working. We were lost and were not dressed properly. We did not know what to do. Unless we could find somewhere to shelter, we were going to freeze to death before the night was over.

We began to despair for our lives. We started to walk back across the fields, now trying to find the road in the dark and all the while praying together loudly and calling upon the Lord. We had gone only a few hundred yards when suddenly, through the snowflakes and out of nowhere, a man was briskly walking toward us. When he reached us, in perfect English he asked, 'Do you need help?' I was ecstatic. I told him our situation. He acknowledged that we were lost, far from our destination and in a dire situation. I asked him if there was any village nearby in which we could shelter? He answered, 'No!' He explained that this area was mostly wilderness and farm fields and, if we were to walk another twenty kilometers, we would be at the sea and the next stop was Norway. I asked him if he could call a taxi for us to take us back to Aalborg. He replied, 'In this weather, no one will come. Even if someone was imprudent enough to do it, the journey may cost you over €1000.' Then he said, 'I have a better suggestion. If you wait for a few more minutes, I will take you in my own car to where you need to be.' Just as he had appeared out of nowhere, he disappeared in the dark of the night.

A few minutes later, a pair of lights materialised in the distance, wobbling on the snow-covered road. We ran towards them. To where he went and from where he fetched the car, I could not tell. Once we got into his little automobile, I noticed it was brand new. It was as though he had just driven it out of a showroom. It smelled and looked pristine. He seemed to be driving it for the first time. It was wonderful to feel the warmth of the heater. He had with him a flask of coffee which he poured and offered us as well as a bottle of water. He opened a bag in which he had warm, fresh sandwiches, and another sack with chocolate bars.

By this time, in my heart, I was certain that this man was not a man. I had had similar encounters and the footprint of the Saviour was everywhere. I knew our Lord was intervening and he had dispatched help. However, I could not bring myself to ask this person, 'Who are you and where did you come from?' Joseph was quite anxious as the road was completely covered under snow and unclear. 'How does he know where he is going?' he asked. Our helper saw his nervousness and began to tell jokes and asked me to translate for Joseph to distract him. Nearly four hours later, now past midnight, he stopped in front of the gates of what looked like an army barracks and said, 'This is the camp where you need to be.'

We told the guard at the gate who we were and why we were there. He called our friends and soon they came to meet us. They were worried but had assumed we had been prevented from coming because of the heavy snowfall. We were exhausted but overjoyed and relieved. We turned to our driver, who had rescued us from certain death, and implored him to stay the night with us and leave in the morning. He refused and said his friends nearby were waiting for him. As a gesture of appreciation, I reached into my coat pocket to offer to pay at least for the fuel. As I reached into my pocket, simultaneously he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out several brand new €100 notes. He handed them to me and said, 'I know you know what to do with this.' The man smiled, said goodbye and disappeared. Joseph turned to me and asked, 'Do you also think he was an angel?'

While in the car, several times I wanted to turn to him and say, 'Sir, who are you really and where have you come from?' But the Holy Spirit restrained my mouth—the question seemed inappropriate. Once we were in the camp, though late, a crowd of our friends soon gathered and we had the most delightful fellowship around the Word of God until early morning. We were in that camp for three days, one of the most unforgettable times in my memory. Once again, the Lord was with us. In that camp room where we met around the Word of God, the Saviour was in the midst and his presence was evident in the response of those who knew the Lord and those who came to know him and made professions of faith at the end of our stay.

NEVER FORSAKEN

The Lord is always beside us. At times, such as this experience in Denmark, we can dramatically see his hand and footprints. However, in those frightful times when it may seem we are all alone and he is so distant, he is just as near. In fact, he is right beside us, before us, behind us, above us – he surrounds his own at all times. They are never left alone. It is only our senses which are misguiding us. He never leaves or forsakes us (Deuteronomy 31:8; Psalm 94:14; Isaiah 41:10-13; 43:2; 1 Peter 5:7; Matthew 28:20; Romans 8:35-39)!

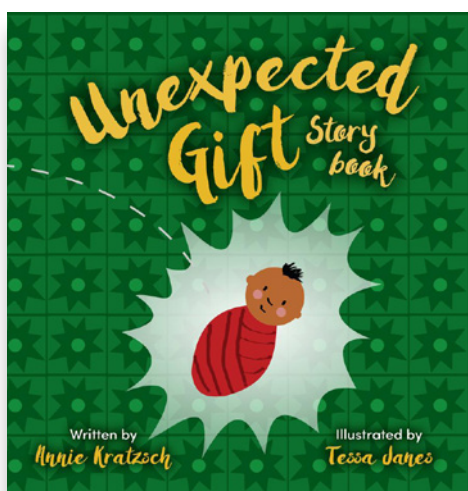
In Denmark, he had sent us to encourage and foster the fellowship of a group of believing refugees. When our lives were in imminent danger, and our divinely ordained mission seemed sure to fail, the Lord directly intervened. He did so not only to save our lives, but for the express purpose of his own mission and work in the world. The establishment of that group of refugees in the faith was of paramount importance in the broader context of that mission. That handful of believers is now a church in Denmark, a beacon of the light of our Lord. The fellowships of these converts continue to grow and spread across Europe, Canada, the United States and as far north as Russia and as far south as New Zealand and Argentina. The story of every believer in these gatherings is a book written by the finger of God. Each of these fellowships across this planet has a remarkable account as to how it was conceived and formed, and every member is a living testimony to the saving work of God in drawing men and women out of darkness into the light of the Son, unto whom be blessing and honour and glory forever and ever! ●

CHRISTMAS BOOK REVIEWS



You really can't go wrong with giving a book at Christmas, and sometimes it's a book about Christmas that can really touch the heart. 2020 has been a bumper year for awesome books about Christmas, and here is our selection of the best. You can find full details of all our Christmas offerings online, at <https://thefree.church/books-christmas20>. For more inspiration, you should also check out the 2018 and 2019 bestseller lists on our website – you chose some absolute crackers.

All books available at <https://thefree.church/shop>, unless otherwise stated.



UNEXPECTED GIFT STORYBOOK & ACTIVITY BOOK ANNE KRATZSCH AND TESSA JANES (2020)

Over the past number of years our children have enjoyed reading part of the Christmas story and doing a short craft each day. However, previous resources we have used have either had really long passages to read, which the younger children can't sit through, or crafts which require all sorts of bits and pieces which we often don't have to hand. I was half thinking of bypassing this tradition this year until I discovered Unexpected Gift from 10Publishing.

The pack consists of two parts, the Story Book and an Activity Book. The storybook is a beautiful and accurate retelling of the Christmas story which can either be read all in one go or can be read one page a day in conjunction with the activity book. Each page is short enough that even the youngest child will be able to listen.

The activity book consists of 25 perforated card pages with a craft on each. These are simple crafts which don't require any extras, but ideas to take the activities further are included at the back of the book. Although we are keeping the book until December, my five-year-old was very excited to give some of the crafts a go and was able to complete them without any help. There is also a Christmas bauble with a verse on each page, which when put together tell the Christmas story.

This really is a fantastic resource. In a year when parents have been stretched thin, this is a resource which has everything done for you – there is no last-minute dash to the shops required for glitter – simply read the page for that day and pull out the craft. Rather than getting caught up in the logistics of the resource, it is my prayer that as a family we will focus on the fact that '... though God is huge and strong, he showed up as a tiny, helpless baby. God surprised us by becoming like us so that we can know him.' ●

These books are available to purchase from Free Church Books, either separately or as a pair.

Suzanne Kane, First Portadown Presbyterian Church



THERE'S A LION IN MY NATIVITY

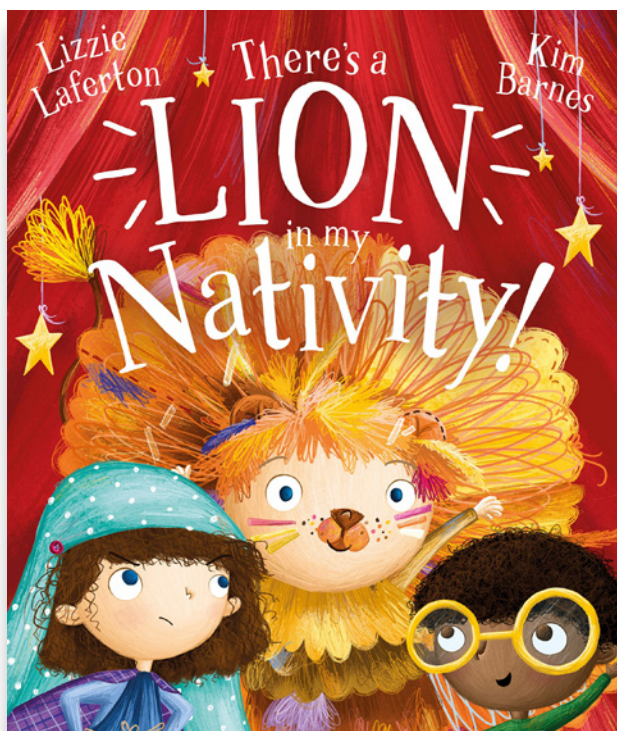
LIZZIE LAFERTON AND KIM BARNES (2020)

My kids were sold on this charming Christmas book from the moment they laid eyes on the cute lion on the cover, standing with a perplexed Nativity-play Mary! The content did not disappoint. With each page, we are introduced to a new 'unusual' element in a Nativity play — a tent, a mobile phone, a boat, and so on. As the little girl playing Mary becomes ever more incredulous, a narrator explains how each element illustrates an element of Jesus' character and mission. It's a sweet, fun way to discover more about Jesus beyond the picturesque manger scene, and it finds simple ways to explain complex theological ideas. 'Mary' also discovers her true place in the story, and it's a helpful reminder that we are not centre-stage in our own lives, but part of 'his story'. The last pages include a summary of each object and what it represents to help the children remember the truths in the story — don't worry, it's fun, not heavy-handed.

After the holidays, I plan to pack this book in our Christmas boxes and make it a tradition to reread it every year, enjoying a festive way to remind ourselves of Jesus' mission beyond Bethlehem. I recommend it heartily for children aged 3-8 — and their grown-ups, of course! ●

This book is available to purchase from Free Church Books.

Dayspring MacLeod, St Columba's Free Church, Edinburgh



SEARCHING FOR CHRISTMAS

J.D. GREEAR (2020)

Our culture tends to sentimentalise and commercialise Christmas. And yet in 2020 it looks like Christmas will be very different from those we are used to. COVID-19 has brought home to all of us the reality of suffering and anxiety and our need of something more. Searching for Christmas points us to the Jesus in the midst of our worries. It looks at the four names given to Jesus in Isaiah 9:6 — Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace — and shows how Christmas is about so much more than we usually focus on! It is about God himself coming into our world to rescue us. Seen in this light, Christmas provides hope in the darkness at a time when we desperately need it. Greear's book is short (just over 60 pages) but full of applicable content to our modern world. It would be a perfect book for giving away during the Christmas season to encourage people to encounter Jesus, in all his glory, this Christmas. ●

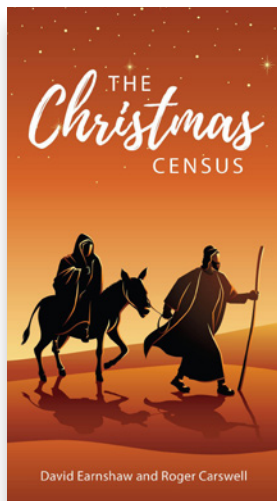
This book is available to purchase from The Good Book Company.

Stephen Allison, Kiltarlity Free Church



These books are only a small proportion of the ones we review.

You can find all our reviews online at <https://books.freechurch.org> or sign up to our monthly email to get them directly to your inbox: <https://thefree.church/books-sign-up>



THE CHRISTMAS CENSUS

DAVID EARNSHAW & ROGER CARSWELL (2020)

Are there people on your Christmas card list whom you know don't love Jesus yet? Do you struggle every year to convey what Christmas really means to you, without straying too far from the usual festive politeness? This little leaflet is designed to help. Perfectly sized to fit inside a Christmas card, it unpacks the life-giving mission of Jesus in a simple yet compelling way.

As David Earnshaw and Roger Carswell remind us, there are two censuses in the New Testament — a famous one at the beginning, but another, more significant, one at the end. The impact of that first census has long faded, but the 'Lamb's Book of Life' will have permanent, incredible, seismic effects. This is the truth of what we believe, and surely we want those we love to be on the right side at the end? If you care enough to send a Christmas card, you care enough to include this message. Only 15p each, or 100 for £6! ●

This leaflet is available to purchase from Free Church Books.

Miriam Montgomery, Free Church Books

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

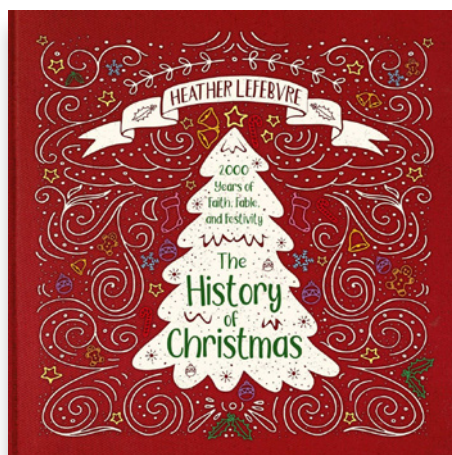
HEATHER LEFEBVRE (2019)

Heather LeFebvre's *History of Christmas* is a wonderful record of the central events that have defined the celebration of Christmas. A warm and stimulating work, the book challenges the reader to keep the festive season firmly focussed upon 'the marvel of the Incarnation' and God's great love towards sinners in Jesus Christ. The book does well to retain the reader's interest as it educates its audience on aspects of Christmas tradition less familiar to modern readers. Moreover, LeFebvre's style is simple, clear and easy-to-read, thus making this work widely accessible. Additionally, the book contains many fun elements such as recommended Bible readings, discussion questions, craft ideas, and even traditional Christmas recipes!

Anyone who desires to learn more about the events that have shaped the current festive season should look no further than this simple yet interesting account of the history of Christmas. ●

This book is available to purchase from Christian Focus Publications.

Connor Lord, Edinburgh Theological Seminary



CHRISTMAS MUSIC REVIEWS



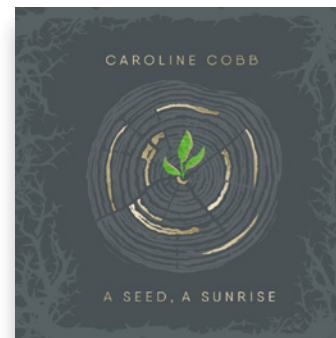
THE ADVENT OF CHRISTMAS HAS ALWAYS BEEN CELEBRATED IN SONG. Luke records Mary's song as she marvelled at God's unfolding plan (Luke 1:46-55). Zechariah prophesied about his own son's role in preparing the way for Jesus (Luke 1: 68-79). The host of angels announced Christ's birth to the Shepherds with a mighty song of praise (Luke 2:14). And Simeon,

when Jesus was presented at the temple, blessed God in verse for the salvation he saw (Luke 2:29-32). Following the tradition of the great Christmas Carols, Christians continue to celebrate Jesus' incarnation with music and song. We recommend a selection of the best new music which expresses some of the glory and greatness of our Saviour's birth.

CAROLINE COBB: A SEED, A SUNRISE

Singer-songwriter Caroline Cobb's albums are works of Biblical Theology. Her lyrics draw directly on Scripture to tell the story of redemption with depth and beauty. She says, 'the Bible demands to be read and retold again and again... So, I keep writing songs from Scripture, looking at this same Story from new angles, just as you'd turn a diamond to let each slant and gradient shine some new light.' Her latest release applies this approach to the coming of the Messiah. *A Seed, A Sunrise* takes Cobb's Americana sound and elevates it with orchestral strings. The album begins in the Old Testament, mourning humanity's brokenness and longing for the promised Saviour. Joy breaks through as Jesus' birth is celebrated, but this is only the half-way point of the record. True to Cobb's style, and placing this among the top tier of Christmas albums, the closing songs look forward to Christ's Second Advent, full of hope. The seven tracks run to just over half an hour, making the depth of theology that is packed into the lyrics all the more impressive.

Highlights: *We Wait for You; Joy (As Far as the Curse is Found)*



DUSTIN KENS RUE: THIS GOOD NIGHT IS STILL EVERYWHERE

Best known as the lead singer and guitarist in acclaimed post-hardcore band, *Thrice*, Dustin Kensrue's solo work makes explicit the theology which often shines through *Thrice*'s lyrics. Kensrue's Christmas album features a mellow, acoustic rock sound, more accessible than the heavy music he is normally associated with. The first four tracks of the album are covers from the Christmas charts, including a cleaned-up *Fairytale of New York*. But it's worth persevering (or skipping) through these to find the four carols and two original compositions that follow. There are no sleigh bells or choral arrangements to be found – these are pared-back songs which focus on the message Kensrue is communicating. The culmination is the album's final track, 'This is War'. The fuzzed guitar interludes and simple melody evoke a beleaguered people who finally see their God arriving at break of day, to be their help and shield (Psalm 46:5). 'He is the rescue we've waited for,' Kensrue sings, 'This is war on sin and death, The dark will take its final breath; It shakes the earth, confounds all plans, The mystery of God-as-man.'

Highlights: *O Holy Night; This is War*



RAIN FOR ROOTS: WAITING SONGS

Nashville-based group *Rain for Roots* write their country and folk songs for children. But the quality of the songwriting and the profound clarity of the lyrics put their work in a league of its own. The group released their first album, *Big Stories for Little Ones* in 2012, setting to music words written by Sally Lloyd Jones (author of *The Jesus Storybook Bible*). *Waiting Songs* is easily the best Christmas album written for children, and there's a lot here for adults, too. *Waiting Songs* is full of rejoicing. But the album refuses to patronise, and is never afraid to face up to the sin that Jesus came to deal with. As a result, the music magnifies the joy and wonder of Christmas by setting Jesus' birth in its true context. Imagining Mary's reflections on the good news she has received, *Rain for Roots* sing, 'Eve, my sister...Lift up your head...The promised One is finally on his way...This baby comes to save us from our sin, A servant King, his kingdom without end'.

Highlights: *Come Light Our Hearts; Mary Consoles Eve*



116: THE GIFT

Named for Romans 1:16, 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...', *116* is a hip hop collective which includes successful Christian artists like Lecrae, Trip Lee and Tedashii. Their Christmas album draws inspiration from beloved Christmas Carols like 'Joy to the World' and 'Silent Night', reworking them in the hip hop and R&B mould of the contributing artists. Hearing Christmas Carol themes through hip hop brings a fresh perspective, but *116* maintain a clear focus on Christ and his work. They make sure to follow the template of the greatest carols in tracing the story of Jesus' birth through to his death a resurrection ('we adore him, let's adorn him...can't afford it, but he paid it all'). *116* have desire to worship their Saviour, and to highlight the divinity of the child in the manger.

Highlights: *Joy; We Three Kings*



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Prayer

I was pleased to see that our church (together with others) is calling for days of prayer, in order to bring the problems created by Covid-19 to the only One with an answer. It is rather sad that our political leaders have not done the same.

In the past there seem to have been two principal motivations for the country to come together in prayer: to seek God's help in secular affairs, and to offer thanks for his intervention. War was, of course, the most common stimulus for such occasions. We are now facing an invisible enemy in the form of a virus, so perhaps it is time for us to remember our history.

On Sunday, 26th May 1940, during World War II, at the time when the British army was surrounded in France and facing possible annihilation at the hands of Nazi forces, King George VI called the nation to prayer. On the day in question, the King and members of the cabinet, together with millions throughout the nation and commonwealth, gathered in churches and cathedrals to join in prayer.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill stated at the time that the very most that would escape to England would be 30,000. In the event 300,000 were rescued from Dunkirk. Even secular commentators called this a miracle. Something happened that historians even 80 years later can't explain. With German tanks rumbling just ten miles from Dunkirk, Hitler did the unthinkable. On the same day that the King had set aside for prayer, Hitler inexplicably halted the offensive. For three days, as the UK knelt as one, these tanks remained stationary. This was the exact window the British needed to form a defensive perimeter and establish a funnel to get troops through to the Channel.

What would a call to prayer look like in Britain today? Would the Government call one? Could it happen in a Christian sense in our pluralistic society? As this coronavirus pandemic continues to rage throughout our land, and indeed worldwide, is it not time to revert back to the King's strategy? God's response can easily be as dramatic as in 1940. Possibly beyond our wildest dreams.

So LET US PRAY.

Sincerely,

Danny Grant (Aultbea)

We would love to hear from you...please write the editor at:

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Edinburgh, EH1 2LS
or e-mail editor@freechurch.org

POETRY PAGE

BETHLEHEM DOWN

BY **BRUCE BLUNT**

'When He is King we will give him the King's gifts,
Myrrh for its sweetness, and gold for a crown,
Beautiful robes', said the young girl to Joseph
Fair with her first-born on Bethlehem Down.

Bethlehem Down is full of the starlight
Winds for the spices, and stars for the gold,
Mary for sleep, and for lullaby music
Songs of a shepherd by Bethlehem fold.

When He is King they will clothe Him in grave-sheets,
Myrrh for embalming, and wood for a crown,
He that lies now in the white arms of Mary
Sleeping so lightly on Bethlehem Down.

Here He has peace and a short while for dreaming,
Close-huddled oxen to keep Him from cold,
Mary for love, and for lullaby music
Songs of a shepherd by Bethlehem fold.

Bethlehem Down is usually sung as a carol or choral anthem. It remains popular in the Anglican tradition. The first and third stanzas contrast people's expectations of the Messiah that was to come with the reality of God's plan for redemption.

The lyrics were written by journalist and poet Bruce Blunt, and the tune composed by his friend Peter Warlock, in 1927. The pair were short of money and so decided to write an entry for the *Daily Telegraph's* annual Christmas song competition. They won, but spent the proceeds on a Christmas Eve drinking session.

The carol's enduring popularity among many Christians begs the question: how important is the author's intent when it comes to using their work in worship? The reference to Mary's 'white arms' has also prompted reflection, with critics suggesting Blunt is projecting race while defenders argue he is referencing Mary's youth and purity. ●



MISSION MATTERS

A monthly take on some of the mission work the Free Church is involved in by our Mission Director, **DAVID MEREDITH**

IF YOU HAVE SET YOUR HEART ON SOMETHING THE MONEY WILL USUALLY BE FOUND. Not only will the money

be found, but there will be a certain delight in owning that new car, pair of shoes or even book. Jesus alluded to that psychology when he said that a person would sell all that they have to buy a valuable pearl. Thankfully, the kingdom comes to us at no cost; that's grace. That which is beyond price is freely and lovingly gifted to us.

As a denomination we are a group of churches linked together by a common creed, history and vision. So much more can be done together than as solitary units. The founders of the Free Church knew this, as demonstrated by Chalmers' belief in 'the power of littles'. If many people give a little, that results in a considerable amount. If we added to our direct debit to the church each month the price of four cappuccinos, it would make a significant difference. If 200 people who buy a grande cappuccino from Starbucks twice a week donated the price of their coffee (£2.60), we could fund a church for a year. Many people could afford the coffee plus the donation. Chalmers' colleague Thomas Guthrie said, 'Separate the atoms that form a hammer, and in that state of minute division they would fall on a stone with no more effect than snowflakes. Weld them into a solid mass and, swung around by the quarryman's brawny arm, they descend on the rock like a thunderbolt.' If the work of mission is to grow and develop, we need to hear that thunderbolt.

This is not yet an appeal for funds for a specific project. It is an attempt to plant a seed and work towards a culture of radical gospel generosity within the denomination and beyond. We have many important projects on the drawing board.

People often say to us, 'Why plant new churches when we have needs among the existing churches?' It's like saying to a family, 'You have a child; why aspire to another one? Just feed the one you have.' God does not hold us to a one-child policy. The

gospel-fuelled church has a policy opposite to the Chinese Communist Party.

Begin to think about radical generosity. Greenock Free Church has been in decline for many years, but the tide is beginning to turn. In the providence of God, a building which blocked it into obscurity has been removed by fire. An insurance claim has enabled a complete refurbishment. The council have provided a free landscaped car park. All windows have been replaced through a generous donation. The kitchen has been totally renewed through another donation. Money has been provided to fund two years of ministry. We believe that the time has come to inject life into the church. This is exactly the type of work we will be looking to the wider church to support. Imagine a mission-minded pastor in a contemporary, Bible-based and gospel-driven church in a population of 100,000 people in the greater Inverclyde area. Wherever you live, you can be part of this radical revitalisation. Growth comes through the power of God, but the worker and his family deserve to be supported as much as every other minister.

Think also of Winchburgh in West Lothian, where a core group has been established with a view to launching a new church later this year. A group of committed young families have a vision to establish a healthy congregation among a new housing development, a planter has been identified and funds will be required to support him. So, cappuccino-drinkers of the Free Church, consider sharing what God has given to you.

There are at least two places in the Bible where we see specific causes for rejoicing. In 2 Corinthians 9:7, 'God loves a cheerful giver', and in Luke 15:10, 'there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Be prepared in this coming year to start giving, 'not reluctantly or under compulsion' but because you have set your heart for the kingdom to be advanced in ordinary places by an extraordinary power.. ●

Tha Mise maille riut

(I am with you)

LE JANET NICPHÀIL

AM-BLIADHNA, MAR A H-UILE BLIADHN' EILE, tha sinn a' faicinn dathan àlainn an fhoghair a' nochdadh nar gàrraidhean, agus duilleach a' tionndadh gu bhith dath uabhasach tlachdmhor don t-sùil.

An-dèidh seo thig bàs a' gheamhraidh agus lusan a'seargadh, ach iad fhathast air am freumhachadh gu làidir san talamh, agus mur marbh reothadh dian iad agus gaothan a' gheamhraidh, bidh dùil riutha nochdadh a-rithist aig àm an earraich.

Tha saoghal nàdair ag atharrachadh gu mòr, 's tha sinn air a bhith ' bruidhinn air airson iomadh bliadhna.

Nì na h-iseanan an imrich, agus cha bhi cus dhiùbh ann, nuair a thig fuachd a' gheamhraidh.

Tha sinn mothachail air na h-atharraichidhean sin anns an t-saoghal mur timcheall, ach, gun fhios dhuinn, tha sinn fhìn ag atharrachadh mar a tha na làithean a' dol seachad.

Gach bliadhna, tha sinn ann an saoghal, agus càirdean agus eòlaich air an toirt dhachaigh, 's air a dhol romhainn.

Am-bliadhna, tha sinn a' comharrachadh bliadhna nar n-eachdraidh a bha cho eadar-dhealaicht', ach, tha sinn a' dèanamh seo le taingealachd, oir gu ruige seo, tha an Cruthaidhear air a bhith math dhuinn le Soisgeul a chluinneas sinn nar dachaighean, dachaighean le biadh agus blàths agus bùrn glan, agus gu fìrinneach tha seo a dhith air mòran anns an t-saoghal.

Ma tha sluagh ann nach bu chòir a bhith a' gearain gu bheil iad leotha fhèin is e sluagh a' Chruthaidheir, oir faodaidh sinn còmhraidh Ris is ùrnaigh a dhèanamh aig gach àm. Chan eil Esan ro dhriheil 's gu feum sinn a bhith a' feitheamh. Tha E comasach iomadh glaoth a chluinntinn agus a fhreagairt aig an aon àm, agus chan e sin a-mhàin, ach is ann Aige-san a tha an stiùireadh a nì feum dhuinn san t-saoghal.

'Is Dia ro mhòr lehòbhah, Rìgh mòr os cionn gach dia.'

Chunnaic E Fhèin iomchaidh aig an toiseach gu robh feum air cuideachd don duine.

Tha a-rèist àite priseil ann do dhachaighean is teaghaichean, ach, ma tha A Làmh Fhèin air sluagh a thoirt dhachaigh, tha càirdean glè fheumail dhuinn anns an t-saoghal.

Tha e math a bhith a' bruidhinn riutha, agus a bhith a' faireachdainn, ged nach eil sinn gam faicinn, gu bheil iad faisg oirnn' nan spioradan.

Tha e air àithne dhuinn a bhith a' giùlain uallaichean a chèile, 's mar sin a' coileanadh lagh Chrìosd.

Ged a tha sinn glè thaingeil airson gach cuideachadh a fhuair sinn am-bliadhna, tha sinn a' guidhe Ris gun atharraich E an staid a tha seo. Cha dèan duine seo ach Esan na aonar.

Tha E Fhèin a' faicinn uallaichean gach aon a chruthaich E, agus tha E glè chomasach an suidheachadh a tha seo a thionndadh mun cuairt, dìreach mar a thionndaidheas dathan nan duilleag.

Is e Dia mòr a th'ann 's gun eu-comas maille Ris, agus nach bu chòir àite mòr a bhith aig Cruthaidhear mar seo?

Aig an àm-sa den bhliadhna, bidh cuimhn' aig saoghal gun do chuimhnich E oirnn' nar staid thruagh, le bhith a' cur losa don t-saoghal a theàrnadh na chreideadh Ann.

A-rèist, ged a tha E cho mòr, nach math gu bheil E cho tròcaireach, 's gun do dh'ullaich E slighe, 's gun do lorg E leigheas don chall uabhasach a thàinig oirnn' ann an gàrradh Edein.

'S e neart do Làimhe deis' a Dhè

'S e neart do Ghàirdein Fhèin

'S e an cumhachd a thig nuair labhras Tu

Nì cuideachadh nar feum.

Thàinig Thu le slàinte dhuinn

nuair mhill an duin' e fhèin

's a-nise thig gur sàbhaladh

bhon tinneas fhuair an grèim. ●





BY CATRIONA MURRAY

POST TENEBRAS LUX

WISH CHILDREN STILL READ BOOKS AS MY GENERATION DID, FOR THE PURE PLEASURE OF THE THING.

Of course I know that they have many more sophisticated distractions than we had (Atari Pong and Etch-a-Sketch have not aged well), but the simple joy of reading still transports me back to a time when stories were my portal to adventure and possibilities beyond anything Lewis in the 1980s could offer.

At this season of the year, I remember a particular favourite, one in which the action took place at Christmas, culminating in a Twelfth Night showdown of epic proportions. Not the sort of row you see nowadays on the 'Eastenders' New Year's Day special, but a real earth-shaking clash of good against evil.

The Dark is Rising was not, as far as I am aware, written from any Christian perspective. Indeed, I believe the author — Susan Cooper — is on record as saying the moral of the book is that we need to help ourselves out of trouble. She did not think that people should believe someone else would rescue them. It is, in that sense, the antithesis of what Christianity teaches.

And yet, she wrote so beautifully of the two forces: the Light and the Dark. Those who belonged to each were engaged in this age-old battle, while the rest of the mortal world remained oblivious. The book's protagonist, a young boy named Will, lives at the heart of a boisterous, loving family, not one of whom seemed aware

that he was in constant peril from the Dark, nor that he was actively engaged in defending the Light from the moment of his eleventh birthday.

Whatever the author's own private beliefs, I think she captures perfectly the driving force that we understand as 'good'. Towards the end of the novel, she says, 'It was not from malice that the Light and the servants of the Light would ever hound the Dark, but from the *nature of things*'

Good — in the true sense of the word — is not subjective. I may do what is good in my own sight, but the action may be frowned upon by God. Indeed, I have done so many times, and grieved him in the process. The only plumb-line by which to measure good is God himself. He IS good; we cannot even understand it. And so, it is the nature of things, just as Susan Cooper wrote, that the Light should be the enemy of the Dark, and pursue it to the last. It is a particularly good metaphor at a time of year when we mark the birth of Christ and all that would follow on as the redemptive plan unfolded. 'The people who were walking in darkness have seen a great light.'

Christmas is celebrated with a blaze of bulbs and fire. It seems fitting to mark the birth of the light incarnate with such a display.

He did not come that first time in a blaze of light, however. Humbly born, lit by primitive candles, the baby that was the Son of God cast aside his

rightful glory to become the weakest and lowliest of beings. The people — the animals, even — who surrounded his manger had more strength than he. When danger came, he was borne away in his mother's arms, not by his own power.

Yet, that tiny child would grow up to vanquish the Darkness.

He did not come in a blaze of glory that first time, but the risen Christ is different. Having accomplished the defeat of death itself and led it away captive, the risen Christ is not the baby of 'Away in a Manger'. Look for his likeness in another carol entirely:

'Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.'

At this year end, you may well have a sense that the dark is rising. It has been a difficult time for the world and some fear the destruction that seems to stalk our land. But think, when Twelfth Night comes, if Christ is at home in your heart, you need fear no force of evil, no foe, no plague. Our Saviour need not hound the Dark, for where he is, it cannot encroach. As Bede so wisely and wonderfully said:

'Christ is the morning star who, when the night of this world is past, brings to his saints the promise of the light of life and opens everlasting day.'

He rose so that the Dark could not. Be near to him only, and you are always safe. ●