

Advent: on Advent Sunday, the 28th, November, Darren Thompson led worship supported by another eight members of the congregation - making it a truly, church family service as we look forward to the spiritual experience of advent.

Dr Donna Moore raised questions about the meaning of advent: what does it all mean for us? In responses from the congregation and with Donna's observations, it was understood to be the coming - the 'arrival' of our Lord Jesus amongst us; about baptism and the great promise, the great anticipation of his second coming to be with us here on earth. Gold and silver are often associated with Christmas, but the true colour of this festival is purple - the colour of Kingship. In the early church fasting was practiced as a preparation for a feast or supper in remembrance of a most celebrated birth.

Darren reflected on a reading from the Prophet Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 14-16.

Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet but answered God's call because he was a sensitive man who deeply loved his people and who hated to pronounce judgement on them. They had worshipped false idols and so there was sin in their hearts which it was the prophet's desire to remove. False idols are a problem that should resonate with us all today, surrounded as we are by such illusions of the modern world - so tempting in what they offer. However, Jeremiah was a prophet of hope for his people predicting that the Lord would choose a king as a righteous descendant of David.....the people will be rescued and live in safety in a city called 'The Lord our Salvation.

It the final Bible reading, from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus warns his disciples to 'be on your guard.be on the alert.... for the coming of the Son of Man. But what does this mean for us now - what should we be looking for? As it can only be good when we feel that Jesus Is with us - so then we should look for the good signs in the world around us. That is the message of Advent. Look for the good in people, or for the good fortune we all experience from time to time or every day. Embrace it, support and nurture it, and never forget to give thanks. No better message at Christmas time than - thank you.

Happy Christmas everyone and a better New Year.

The Thursday Coffee Morning:

Since the 15th, October Sandra Verrill and friends have managed the Market Day Coffee Morning - revived after the long church closure because of Covid restrictions. We are

'open for business' is the message for anyone in town on Thursday mornings around 9.30am until 11.30am.

Darren Thompson Is in church from 10.30am for the private prayer session. which is followed, at 11:30, by the prayer meeting.

On Saturday, the 18th, December, there will be a Christmas Coffee Morning in the church at 9.30am, giving an opportunity for members, friends and a wider range of the public to attend. Please come.

The Bridge Association.

Carol Singing

On Tuesday, 14th, December and Tuesday, 21st of December, we will be Carol singing outside of the Methodist Church during the Coffee Morning time of 9.30 to 11.30am.

If you are able to join us at this time please let us know as numbers are limited to eight people. Phone Shona on 07890 228851.

Volunteering

The Bridge Association are now looking for volunteers for a project called 'Tutor Mate.' There is a need for people to listen to children to read online and to support literacy in schools. Together with Middlesbrough and Cleveland Council the Bridge are working on this idea. Volunteers need to be familiar with the use of computers - but training is given and the work offered can be as little as 30 minutes a week.

In-line with all work with children a DBS check needs to be carried out, but it will be the most rewarding work for anyone interested in taking part.

Here is a link which is really worth watching: Tutor/MateUK - learn how your school can benefit from online reading volunteers - YouTube

If you wish to know more, or are interested in volunteering, get in touch with the Bridge through Karen or Shona: 07890 228851

Sermon: a Christmas Carol

(Adapted sermon as preached at St Andrew's Mission, Thornaby, 2016.)

In October 1843, Charles Dickens began the writing of one of his most popular and best-loved books, *A Christmas Carol*. It was written in six weeks and finished by the end of November, being fitted in the intervals of writing the monthly parts of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. *A Christmas Carol* would, he hoped, bring a good financial return - and it did so much more than that.

The story, once conceived, gripped Dickens. 'He wept over it, and laughed, and wept again, and excited himself to an extraordinary degree'. 'He walked thinking of it fifteen and

twenty miles about the black streets of London', often at very late hours of the night. He kept Christmas that year with an extraordinary zest; 'such dinings, such dancings, such conjurings, such blind-man's buffings, such theatre-goings, such kissing-out of old years and kissing-in of new ones, never took place in these parts before'. Savouring the atmosphere of Christmas in London became part of Dickens' annual routine. Every Christmas Eve he went to visit the Christmas markets in the East End between Aldgate and Bow, and he liked to wander in poor neighbourhoods on Christmas Day, 'past the areas of shabby genteel houses in Somers or Kentish Towns, watching the diners preparing or coming in'. *A Christmas Carol* captures in many places what Dickens so acutely observed. How exciting to feel like that about Christmas!

Like his other novels it addressed the dire social problems and injustice of the day - but there was more to it than that for in the story we get the clear unmistakable feeling and vision of joyful hope for the future. The miserly Ebenezer Scrooge finds redemption by joining in the spirit of Christmas and accepts the benefits of generosity, not only to those who will receive his gifts, but most importantly for himself - he becomes a changed man. If Scrooge can be converted surely there can be no limit to what is possible?

Isaiah in the latter half of the 8th, century BC saw that the real threat to Judah was not simply the might of Assyria, but the nation's own sin and disobedience to the will of God, and their lack of trust in him. In vivid words and actions, the prophet called the people and their leaders to a life of righteousness, justice, and warned that failure to listen to God would bring doom and destruction. Isaiah urges King Ahaz to stand firm in the knowledge that the Lord will deliver him from the Assyrian threat. As a sign, Isaiah speaks of a virgin giving birth to a son who will be called Emanuel. He would be an ideal king, a descendant of King David and heralding a time of world-wide peace.

We don't have peace at the present time as the events of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, continuing war in Yemen, in Ethiopia and the conflict caused by refugees trying to enter the EU via Poland amply demonstrate. And the cause of such terrible destruction and death is in effect failing to follow the will of God. Not a fashionable thing to say in the present day, but then when we look back on Christ's two '*Great Commandments*' we can see it clearly as day: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself. We are all people no matter who we are - and so if we were to abide by that second commandment alone - then where would be the conflict? Except, of course, there is the little matter of past wrongs and injustices. How do we make a start to resolve this?

One way is to look at the story of the nativity again - but from a different angle to a traditional view. The story is

one of conflict. A political conflict like the ones we have seen in our life-times.

Herod is frightened of a baby who could be his successor. That child is from a Jewish couple who may be set to break up when Mary becomes pregnant. But Joseph is told that she is pregnant through the Holy Spirit – and so he trusts in this message and marries her. No traditional family values here. We are then presented with contrasting images of kingship. We have the worldly Kingship of Herod, rooted in wealth, violence, deceit and political manipulation. Against this we have the child of an almost single mother who becomes a refugee. As the child grows up, he mixes with the marginalized, sides with the poor and exemplifies active non-violence.

Since that time the church has often shown support for the sort of power represented by Herod than the 'upside down kingship' of Jesus. The conditions of today clearly demonstrated that the strong man or woman type of leadership has failed. We have a broken world wherever more expenditure on defence has brought us nothing but conflict and war. This surely is the time when we are battling so many problems, such as global warming which may threaten the existence of viable life on earth, we need a leadership like that of Jesus where we come together in love and reconciliation to find solutions that are fair and just to all. A leadership that does not impose from the top but takes ideas from us all – and then takes us forward together towards a solution. This seems so like heaven. Yes, heaven on earth – *our Lord's Prayer*.

But how, as Christians, do we make a difference? In a recent Guardian article Chibundu Onuzo, a novelist writes: '*I'm invisible - I am a Christian.*' She makes acute observations of how Christianity is rarely featured in popular culture unless it is yet another prediction of how long it will be before the faith dies out in the UK. She gives the example of Sarah Kuteh who, as a nurse, was sacked by the Darent Valley hospital in Kent for giving religious support to a patient, which was described as gross misconduct. And then in general conversation with colleagues or friend's faith can easily become a topic relegated to the margins for fear that the subject may develop into an issue for ridicule – for such can be the effects of modern-day culture.

It is important that we always try to rise above this attitude s what we have to offer is still of such great value a counter blast to the false values of consumerism and the constant striving to produce more and more material things – as a way to enhance our lives, seek fulfilment and happiness. How do we do this in such a secular, materialistic society as ours? How do we make our voice heard?

We need to be a little less invisible. When Charles Dickens was writing A Christmas Carol his enthusiasm knew no bounds. He threw himself into the work with complete commitment. It was a joyful activity. He was to show how a man could be completely transformed. This is a fictional character, but the sentiment is powerfully invoked. And the story still resonates today in the various revivals on TV and in film of this mot favourite of tales.

Here we are in this *Advent season of hope* where we are faced with the question: how does hope look, in our present situation as it is in this world? Is it simple a smile to hide our fears or a blindfold to hide the dangers from our eyes? Perhaps it is something like a stream of water. It needs to go somewhere. It may be blocked time after time, but it will always find a different route through to the sea. It pushes to find a way through. Hope is not trying to believe that everything will be fine, it is the knowledge that it is still worth pushing on.

Jesus said don't worry about tomorrow. The energy and worry we spend on things we can't change is fruitless – but focus on those things we can and there will be many. The best criticism of all that may be bad, in our experience, is the practice of '*the good*' and we can all do that.

We can gain encouragement from the sentiments Dickens describes at the end of his Christmas story where it is written: "*The bells of Christmas move from dream to reality as Scrooge wakes on Christmas Day: He was checked in his transports by the churches ringing out the lustiest peals he had ever heard. Clash, clang, hammer; ding, dong, bell. Bell, dong, ding; hammer, clang, clash. Oh, glorious! Glorious!*"

This marvellous evocation of change-ringing, serves as symbol of the incarnation now in Scrooge's life. That new reality is summed up in the final sentences of the story, when Dickens writes that Scrooge now knew '*how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.* May that be truly said of us, and all of us. And so, as Tiny Tim observed, "*God bless Us, Everyone.*" Amen.

SERVICES FOR DECEMBER at 10.00am.

SERVICES December:

5th, Rev Norma Johnson.

12th, Guisfolk followed by a Church Meeting

19th, Rev Keith Martin

25th, Christmas Day - Dr Donna Moore

26th, (Sunday) NO SERVICE

January

2nd, Dr Donna Moore

9th, Maranny Jones

16th, Rev William Middlemiss

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is from the 16th - 23rd, January.

23rd, Dr Donna Moore.

30th, Ray Tunnicliffe

Everyone will be welcome at our services. Come for worship, or to learn about faith in Jesus, or simply to find some good friends.

GUISBOROUGH UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Founded 1798



Church circa 2010

56, Westgate, Guisborough.

**MERRY CHRISTMAS
&
A HAPPY NEW YEAR**

News Letter

December/January 2021/22

Secretary 01287 637273