



The Benefice of St Mary's Bocking & Panfield Church



Sunday 31st December 2023
The First Sunday of Christmas
Staying in Contact

The Very Revd Rod Reid - Incumbent (*usual rest day Monday*)

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or on Facebook, search for 'St Mary's Church, Bocking', or 'Panfield Church'

Forthcoming Services

Hymns

St Mary's, Bocking

Sunday 31st December	8am	Said Mass
	10am	Sung Mass
Wednesday 3rd January	9.30am	Said Mass
Sunday 7th January	8am	Said Mass
	10am	Sung Mass

16 - Joy to the World

23 - Infant Holy

12 - Hark the Herald
angels sing

24 - Good Christians
all rejoice

Panfield Church

Sunday 31st December	*** Please note—no service ***	
Tuesday 2nd January	*** Please note—no Office Hour ***	
Sunday 7th January	11am	Holy Communion
Tuesday 9th January	5pm	Office Hour/Evening Prayer

Gospel Acclamation

*In his own time, and in these
last days, God has spoken to us
through his Son.*

NOTICES

Thank you - Rod and the family would like to say a huge thank you to all of you for the cards and gifts in the run up to Christmas, each of which is thoroughly appreciated. It seems hard to believe this is our 10th Christmas in the Benefice! We all hope that you have a wonderful and Happy Christmas.

Christmas Tree Festival - A huge thanks to every single person who has worked so hard in the lead up to and across the Christmas Tree Festival. We really are extremely grateful to those who volunteered and took part. A big team effort, which is very much appreciated. The final total is just over £2,500 (with gift aid to be claimed too!) and includes £230 from the Brass Band concert at the start of the month.

Eco Church - Well done St Mary's! After the further hard work, we have been awarded an Eco Church, Silver Certificate! This is a brilliant and deserved reward, but the work goes on!

Midweek Services - A reminder that there will be no Office Hour/Evening Prayer in Panfield until January 9th, and the next midweek communion service at St Mary's will be on Wednesday Jan 3rd 2024!

Friendly Friday Cafe - A reminder that the next session of the Friendly Friday Café will be January 12th following a Christmas Break. Sessions will then run up to just before Easter.

Prayers - We keep in our prayers Barry and Janice Goody, Jean Goodwin, Sue, Roger, Frances, Jo Meech, and Tony & Ann. We remember our care homes Millard House, Fern Lodge, Aspen Grange, Larchwood, The New Deanery & St Mary's Court. In our Years Mind, we pray for the families of Dorothy Johnson, Agnes Adams, Stephanie Collins, Winifred Jordan, Ethel Smith, Stanley Williams, Marguerite Gray, Doris Fox, Leslie Acton and William Biggs.

The Collect for The First Sunday of Christmas

Almighty God,
who wonderfully created us in your own image
and yet more wonderfully restored us
through your Son Jesus Christ:
grant that, as he came to share in our humanity,
so we may share the life of his divinity;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Epistle Reading - Galatians 4:4-7

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Gospel Reading - Luke 2:15-21

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Address

St Luke's Gospel chapter 2, verse 19: 'But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart'. When reading this short passage from St Luke's Gospel, I was struck by the word 'ponder'. It is not one that we perhaps use very frequently, yet it is the word used in many translations into English of this passage, including both the King James Bible from the seventeenth century and the New International Version from the twentieth. Its meaning is to think carefully about something, especially for a noticeable length of time. Given what Mary had just experienced, and indeed what had happened to her nine months previously, it is hardly surprising that she needed to ponder, to reflect, to think deeply. Could she make a coherent whole out of what must have seemed like a succession of unexpected occurrences: the initial visit by the Angel, the long journey to Bethlehem, the search for somewhere to stay, the birth of Jesus, the appearance of the shepherds with their story of angels and then, a little later, the visit of the magi with their symbolic gifts. No wonder Mary pondered.

And perhaps we need time to ponder. December can be so full of things to do that there may not be much time to think or to reflect deeply on what it is really all about. It is only too easy to focus on one part of the story and ignore other bits. I wrote this sermon last Thursday, 28th December, when

the church commemorates the Holy Innocents, the babies murdered in Bethlehem on the orders of King Herod. It is an important part of the story, but not one that gets depicted on Christmas cards, nor indeed is very often the subject of a sermon. Perhaps that is understandable. It is, however, important not to fall into the trap of thinking that one part of the story is actually the whole story.

Many of you may know the parable of the blind men and the elephant. But nevertheless, let me tell it you. Once upon a time, there lived six blind men in a village. One day the villagers told them, "Hey, there is an elephant in the village today." They had no idea what an elephant was. They decided, "Even though we would not be able to see it, let us go and feel it anyway." All of them went where the elephant was. Each of them touched the elephant. "Hey, the elephant is a pillar," said the first man who touched his leg. "Oh, no! it is like a rope," said the second man who touched the tail. "Oh, no! it is like a thick branch of a tree," said the third man who touched the trunk of the elephant. "It is like a big hand fan" said the fourth man who touched the ear of the elephant. "It is like a huge wall," said the fifth man who touched the belly of the elephant. "It is like a solid pipe," Said the sixth man who touched the tusk of the elephant. They began to argue about the elephant and everyone of them insisted that he was right.

In a way, everyone was right. Some part of the elephant was indeed like each of these things. The mistake they made was to assume that the part of the elephant they touched comprised the whole of the animal. It is an easy mistake to make. I suspect that many of us do something a bit similar when it comes to matters of faith and belief. We latch on to that part of the Christian story that most appeals to us and try to ignore the parts that make us feel uncomfortable. Or we perhaps take great pleasure in hearing a Cathedral choir sing Evensong, but close our ears when it comes to the Old Testament reading particularly if it is very obscure or very bloodthirsty. In modern parlance there does perhaps need to be a trigger warning on some Old Testament lessons.

It may be possible in some faith traditions to separate certain practices from the belief system that lies behind them. For example, the sort of meditation that derives from Buddhism can be found to be helpful by people who do not profess to be Buddhist. The practice of mindfulness is, I suspect, one sort of example of that. No doubt the experience is richer if you are also able to accept basic Buddhist beliefs but that is not a pre-requisite for engaging in such meditation.

Although, as I have just said, I am aware of people who greatly appreciate choral Evensong and the language of the Book of Common Prayer without professing to be practising Christians, in general I think it is much more difficult to separate belief and practice in Christianity than it is in westernised Buddhism. There is also a limit as to how far it is possible to pick and choose what to believe and what to discard with regard to Christian doctrine. Biblical scholarship is of enormous value in helping us to understand the context out of which the scriptures emerged, and also enabling us to make sense of these in the modern world. But it cannot tell us what to believe and how to act on those beliefs. We need to make time to do some pondering.

I 'came of age' in church terms in the years soon after 'Honest to God' was published. I am sure I have said in previous sermons that I found that book, and other writings by Bishop John Robinson, profoundly liberating. It gave me and many others the freedom to ask questions and express doubts. If I had not had that freedom I doubt whether I would have remained in the church after my teenage years. But I am also aware that there is a time when the questioning and the doubting have to stop and when it is necessary to affirm what I believe and to try to act on that. And that for me entails something of a return to Christian orthodoxy and a rejection of attempts to reduce Christianity to a somewhat sentimentalised focus on loving each other, important as that certainly is.

I am increasingly drawn to the writings of N T Wright whose easy to read guides to the books of the New Testament are often the first thing I turn to when trying to write a Biblically based sermon. But Wright can also capture the real heart of the Christian message in a very few words. His theology is focussed on the Crucifixion and its meaning for all humanity. He writes, “The death of Jesus of Nazareth as the King of the Jews, the bearer of Israel’s destiny, the fulfilment of God’s promises to his people of old, is either the most stupid, senseless waste and misunderstanding the world has ever seen, or it is the fulcrum around which world history turns. Christianity is based on the belief that it was and is the latter.”

There is perhaps an echo here of C. S. Lewis from the middle of the last century: “Either this man [Jesus] was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Both of these quotes are challenging and thought-provoking. There is much to ponder here. But hopefully that pondering will lead us to saying ‘Yes’ to the God who invites us to share in his redeeming love for humanity and indeed for this amazing planet which we call our home. Amen.

Post Communion Prayer

Heavenly Father,
whose blessed Son shared at Nazareth the life of an earthly home:
help your Church to live as one family,
united in love and obedience,
and bring us all at last to our home in heaven;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

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your phone at anytime and
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Open your camera app, hold it
over the QR code and then
click ‘open link’ *Thank you*

