

Ploughshare December 2000/January 2001 (Selected articles scanned in from the magazine)

From The Curate

Last year a couple of friends (two members of St Thomas') decided to spend Christmas Day on the beach with a flask of soup and some sandwiches! For some it may seem strange to spend Christmas in that way. For me, it seems liberating and so different that it challenges us to ask once again what Christmas is really about.

Liberating? Yes .. freedom! Freedom from the busyness, the overindulgence, the overspending, the ever increasing stress and hype. Does that seem negative? It's not meant to be ... it is, rather too often a realistic picture of what Christmas is for many.

A challenge? Yes ... to think again! What is Christmas really about?

It's all about the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. God who came to live among us ... incredible? Yes it is! But why? This story helps to answer that question ...

It was a snowy Christmas Eve. Inside the warm house, the Christmas tree was cheerfully ablaze with lights and surrounded by dozens of presents. The man's wife and children were dressed and ready to leave for church. "Come with us", they said, for they loved him. "Not me", he snapped. "I don't believe all that religious garbage."

For many years the man's wife had been trying to tell him about Jesus and the salvation he offers. How God's Son had become a human being in order to show us the way to heaven. "Nonsense", the man always said.

The family left for church and the man was all alone in his cosy country home. He glanced out of the window at the cold snowy scene outside. He turned to warm himself by the fire.

But as he turned, his eyes caught a movement in the snow outside. He looked. Cats! Three young cats walking slowly past his window. "The fools", he thought. "They'll freeze for sure!" The man put on his hat and coat and opened the door. A blast of wintry air sent a shiver through his body.

"Come here, cats! Come inside where there's warmth and food. You'll die out there." But the cats ran away, frightened by the stranger at the door. He walked outside. "Come back! Don't be afraid, I want to save you."

But the cats were gone. It was too late.

"Well, I did everything I could for them", the man muttered to himself. "What more could I do? I'd have to become a cat myself in order to reach them and save them. If I became a cat, I could tell them and show them. They would have to believe me then surely?"

Just as he reached the door, the church bells rang in the distance. The man paused for a second and listened. Then he went in by the fire, got down on his knees and cried.

This is what Christmas is really about. God loves us so much that he came to earth to show us how to be saved. And if we listen to him and follow him, then we will not perish but instead will be given everlasting life. That surely is the reason to have a "Happy" Christmas and, for those who accept this offer, a wonderful New Year.

Petra Owen

Reader in Training (Pat Clayton)

One of the strengths of St Thomas' is its team of Licensed Readers. In addition to their everyday contribution to Church life, they preach and help to lead services. This provides much valued variety and helps members not to get too fed up with the sight and sound of the Rector and Curate.

We have another Reader in training **Pat Clayton** felt a definite call to offer herself for this ministry while at Spring Harvest last Easter and she was recommended for training. She has started leading services and preaching occasionally and has been encouraged by the warm reception she has received.

Pat is a primary school teacher in Eckington. After working for several years for a computer company in Redditch, she returned to Chesterfield and trained for teaching in Sheffield. It has been a fulfilling career change.

Three years ago, Pat's mother died. She started coming to St Thomas' with Laura, her daughter, after that. She joined an Alpha course and came to a living faith in Jesus, which has steadily blossomed. She gave her "testimony" - telling her story - in St Thomas' a year ago just after her birthday. "I can honestly say that the last two years have been far, far better than the previous thirty something", she said smiling, broadly.

Pat adds, "I am very please to have started my Reader training, and feel both encouraged and excited that God is leading me along this new path in my Christian life."

The Healing Ministry

As we read through the gospels it is clear that Jesus linked salvation with healing, that is "making whole". Salvation comes as a result of the single act of atonement carried out by **Our Lord by his death** on the cross and is offered to all who believe. What we learn from the gospels, however, is that Jesus is not merely a Saviour of Souls but a Saviour of persons - body and soul.

There were four main area of need to which Jesus applied his powers of healing:

1. Sin
2. Inner healing
3. Physical healing
4. Deliverance from evil spirits.

Sometimes these would overlap. In the area of sin, there are two separate occasions in the gospels when Jesus said to a person: "*Sin no more.*" On the first occasion (John 5:14) healing of a physical condition had already taken place, but with a warning that "*something worse might befall you*" unless the sin was given up. We are not to conclude from this that the man's crippled condition was the result of sin. On the contrary Jesus told his disciples in another case that it was neither the man's sins nor his parents' sins that were responsible for his blindness but that the works of God might be made manifest in him. This reveals that God delights in healing. On the second occasion (John 8:11) there was a need for inner healing in the woman accused of adultery that would take place only after the sin was given up. It is plain from this that there may be besetting or lifestyle sins that may well be the cause of either outer or inner sickness and which need confronting before God can release the sufferer.

But how does the healing ministry relate to those forms of suffering, e.g. incurable diseases, which God undoubtedly allows to happen? Many of us ask: "If God can put a stop to suffering, why doesn't he?" There is no simple answer but there are several key ideas that are Biblical and represent a balanced point of view.

1. God has revealed himself as being on the side of life in spirit, mind and body. Therefore he will respond to prayer for healing unless the sickness is permitted for some higher purpose.
2. Sickness is in itself an evil, although good may result from it. Sickness came into the world as a result of original sin. But through the power of the resurrection God broke into our wounded world and empowers us to co-operate with him by healing and reconciling man and all creation.
3. There comes a time for a person to die. This is obviously true but many people wonder whether they should pray for the recovery of people who are ill with a terminal disease. The answer is that we should pray for the Lord to reveal whether to ask God to take away the sickness or to pray for a happy death, which is not a tragedy at all, but a passing into a deeper life with God.

The ministry of prayer and laying on of hands seeks to apply these principles. The basis for this ministry can be found in Mark 16:17 though there are many more references. These clearly dispel the commonly held view that only the Apostles and Early Church Saints could practice them and that they were done to convince the doubters and to get the early church off the ground. God deals with us all as individuals, and as we respond to his invitation to draw near he gives his Holy Spirit to us, and he bids any of us who are suffering to call the elders of the church and let them pray over them.

St Thomas' offers this ministry as a regular part of its evening services.

Robert Batten

New Faces

*The parish has taken on two new employees and both are already making quite an impact. **Julie Lomas** is our part-time Administrator and Rector's Secretary and **Neil Roper** is our full-time Youth and Children's Worker.*

Julie

Hello - I'm Julie Lomas, and in October I took up the job of Administrator / Rector's PA. I work in the church office on a Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

It's a bit of a long story as to how I came to be here, but here's a potted version for you...

Back in 1986, Steve and I got married in St Thomas' and we have been members ever since, with our three children. However, in about September 1999 I began to be aware that God wanted to be more involved in my life than I had allowed before. I have been a pretty self-sufficient sort of person, and although I had been conscious of God supporting me through some pretty difficult times I still liked to think I could do things "my way". Slowly it began to dawn on me that now was the time to stop struggling and trying to do everything on my own, and to rest back into God's hands and learn to trust Him.

Around May time this year I whispered one of those prayers that I found out later was going to change everything. It went along these lines "OK God, you can come in to my life - a little bit more" - except God only heard the first part of the prayer!

Then everything changed - and within a month I had resigned from my job as Head of Corporate Planning for a national company based in Sheffield, and I was having an interview with Christopher, Petra and Pam Brimelow, discussing leaving all my worldly success behind, and working here in St Thomas'. Throughout this

time God supported us as a family, especially Steve and the children, Katie, Eleanor and Sam who were wondering what on earth was going on! On top of all this I was also diagnosed as having Diabetes and was quite poorly whilst my blood sugars were stabilised. I have learnt to adjust to a new way of life of injecting insulin and watching carefully what I eat and what I do.

A few months into the new job, and into diabetes, these passages from the Bible are the ones that have meant most to me:

Matthew 6:25 - 34, and especially these verses:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear...but seek first His kingdom, and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"

Psalms 121, and especially v 1 - 2

" I lift my eyes up to the hills
Where does my help come from?
My help come from the Lord
The creator of heaven and earth"

So, here I am, very much learning "on the job", enjoying the variety of things that need to be done behind the scenes each week, and of course, working with a lot of different people. It is a privilege to be able to serve God in this place and I thank Him for being the One to whom I can turn for my help.

Best wishes,

Julie Lomas

Neil

Neil, (already affectionately known among CYFA members as 'Mark', 'Roper', or `DJ', so as not to be confused with our own Neil McGovern) is a vibrant 26 year old who comes originally from Enfield, North London. Coming from a very supportive Christian family, he invited Jesus into his heart at age 6 and as he continued to learn about and understand more of God, he made many responses to Him, culminating in his baptism in the sea at the age of 12. As he grew older he recognised God's call on his life to be involved in youth and children's work taking every opportunity to gain experience in this area.

He was led to be involved with an organisation named 'VIZ A VIZ', for which he worked up until a month before joining us in Chesterfield. During that time he did an incredible amount of evangelistic outreach, working alongside both schools and about 20 churches in the Chelmsford area. The majority of this work was in the upper end of primary schools; he's calculated that he's taken 400 lessons and 300 assemblies in the past 2 years. Busy man! All of this was complemented by successful lunchtime groups and links with local church groups.

Neil came to realise from this that his ideal job would be working for a church and providing the link with schools. Luckily for us he was happy to move on when this job opportunity arose. He believed that St Thomas' was where God wanted him to be even before the interview, as he felt so comfortable here.

From the short time he's been with us, it's already clear that he's the right bloke for us! I can only speak for members of CYFA, but he appears to have fitted in well with everyone, being enthusiastic and motivated to convey holy living and to teach God's Word directly into youth culture. He is very keen to continue and build on work with the North Midlands Youth Project -something that brings us closer to and united with other churches in the area. A recent weekend away, which several of us attended and thoroughly enjoyed, gave Neil the opportunity to get to know other youth workers, and the youth that he will be serving. Similarly, at The Great

Escape' party held on the 31st October, it was exciting to witness the natural ability he possesses for communicating the Gospel to children. He has shown much potential for future events.

Neil's vision for the church is to see children and young people move on in their own faith, so that they can step out in confidence and make a difference in their homes, schools, colleges, work places, community, nation and world. He aims to encourage and establish groups for fellowship, teaching, and discipleship, including mid-week groups for 7-10 and 10-12 year olds. He hopes that evangelistic outreach to 'unchurched' youth and children can be done through lunchtime groups in schools.

Neil is engaged to Amanda, who he has been going out with for 2 years after meeting her at the Notting Hill Carnival. They will be getting married in July next year. Amanda is also fitting in well and, after she finishes her degree in Biblical Studies at Sheffield University in the summer, I'm sure, will be an invaluable member of the church community.

Suzanne Foan

Hope for Eastern Europe

"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you."

At the beginning of June, a very urgent appeal went out for Armenia through my friend Hosana at Matlock Christian Coffee Club. A family who live in Holbeach, Lincolnshire was planning to send a container full of Humanitarian aid out at the end of June 2000. They needed emergency supplies very quickly to respond to God's call for his suffering people in Armenia.

During the appeal I felt very challenged, especially as we had quite a good number of boxes of various supplies ready prepared - waiting for "such a time as this" at our warehouse in Chesterfield. I approached my friend at the end of the meeting to share the good news. Things began to move very quickly from this point, especially when I had an opportunity a few days later to share this experience during a team meeting. Through prayer, we all felt a deep desire to step out in faith and put love into action even though we had just returned from our May mission to Romania.

When you hear God's call - suddenly and unexpectedly and everyone is united and spontaneous in their reaction then it is really very exciting and rewarding.

We sent 100 'Gift of Love' family food parcels, and many other parcels including medical supplies and hospital equipment and even two bicycles! Our Ford Cargo lorry was full to capacity as it travelled down to Spalding, Lincolnshire.

Les, Hosana and myself had the privilege of delivering these very special supplies given and prepared with love to help meet the needs of our brothers and sisters in Armenia.

Armenian Ministries and the Pembakian family wish to thank everyone for their lovely donations. It will be a wonderful gift for the recipients. You will be pleased to hear that so much aid was collected that in the end two containers were sent. The first container arrived in Armenia in August and the second was on its way. They plan to send another container before Christmas, as there is a food shortage due to a severe drought.

May God bless you all.

Pamela Gratton

Harry Potter Brilliant Idea or Bad Influence?

In most children's diaries, and indeed those of many adults, a new occasion has been recorded; the annual publication of each new *Harry Potter* book. Why is it then that something which causes so much joy has been called unchristian and a dangerously bad influence?

Having read all the *Harry Potter* books, it is easy to see why some people have raised objections to them. The presence in the books of witches, ghosts and other unusual magical creatures has made a few people concerned- the children are being encouraged to take an interest in black arts and unchristian practices. The situation has got so bad that some schools have banned the books and an apparently Christian organisation in America has been sending death-threats to the author, J. K. Rowling. I fail to see how they are able to reconcile that with the Christian idea of the sanctity of life.

It is perfectly right to be concerned about the possible influence of these books. But the objectors are missing one major point: children are not letting themselves be adversely influenced by these books. Reading about someone being turned into a rat does not make them start trying to do the same to their friends; similarly they are not likely to go looking for unicorn blood to drink just because they read of it in *Harry Potter*. As the Bishop of Bolton, the Rt Revd David Gillett puts it, "Children know the difference between good and evil ... And they know they can't fly on broomsticks."

If we look more closely at the *Harry Potter* books we see that they are actually very easy to reconcile with the Christian message. Essentially they are about the struggle between good and evil, and if the early books are anything to go by, the good is almost certain to win! The combination of magic with the triumph of good over evil has led to many comparisons with the C. S. Lewis *Narnia* books, and no one denies the Christian message present in them. Another recurring theme is that of life after death. By this I don't mean the ghosts that float around the castle, but the relationship Harry has with his dead parents. I can put it no better than Dumbledore himself: "You think the dead we have loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don't recall them more clearly than ever in times of trouble? Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him."

This brings us on to another very important message in the books: love. Harry owes his life to his mother's unconditional love for him, just as Lord Voldemort (Harry's enemy, the most evil wizard ever) owes his downfall to it. In a less dramatic, but equally important sense, the books show the development of Harry's relationships with his best friends Ron and Hermione. Loyalty and trust battle with jealousy and many petty quarrels; but they come out best. In this way Harry is an ideal role model to all children.

Other examples of the good influence of these books are the celebration of Christmas, including the singing of Christmas carols; evidence of Christian influence even in today's secular society. Also the way the art of future gazing is clearly ridiculed and disapproved of even by the teachers, the emphasis being placed on non-magical values. Again it is Dumbledore who expresses this after the singing of the school song, "Music.. a magic beyond all we do here."

However there is a risk here of placing too much emphasis on the morality of the *Harry Potter* books. It must be remembered that they are really only amazingly good stories. They contain all the themes used in the best of children's books: the school story, the magical aspect, the presence of the evil aunt and uncle, and an incredible vocabulary of names and inventions such as Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans (they really do come in every flavour, including baked beans, pepper, vomit and earwax)! Even if these books do contain a small amount of potentially harmful material, surely it is against the principles of our society to deny people the right to read them. Each individual, even a child, should have the right to choose what they read. Parents should be able to regulate this, but the *Harry Potter* books are not something that deserve censorship; they deserve merely to be enjoyed.

Rachel Perham

Rachel is a daughter of the Dean of Derby, the Very Revd Michael Perham.