

December thoughts, from Father Charles:

Advent Thinking - The 2014 Plan!

Like most of us, at work and in our various organizations, November and December have significant time taken up with planning for the coming year. Budgeting, planning and forecasting seem to become a way of being, and the output of these actions then needs to be translated into people's personal targets and development activity. These are processes we all know so well – and, in truth, probably wish we could avoid.

Now it just happens that two of the sermons at All Saints, during the last few weeks, have accidentally picked up on this theme and have resonated with things that are currently in my mind. Let me explain why and then I'll talk about the two sermon points.

The Power of Us

Fortunately we are all different, and in some cases very different. This is good, because we all benefit from the collective result of these differing abilities, skills and approaches. I know that one of the most challenging activities for managers is to recognise the differences and shape people's targets and objectives to the best effect. This also includes shaping their development and growth, not to focus on what they are poor at, but what they are good at – so we can have more of what people do well.

When I look around All Saints (and into my mirror) I see a worshipping community with a myriad of skills and abilities. Some of these are worked out in a visible way, for the benefit of us all; and others are far less visible but no less important. In a work situation our boss might come along and work with us to develop and hone these abilities or behaviours, but in the Church it's very much down to us to take care of our own development. Some of us may have 'spiritual advisors', some of us might listen to our parish priest, and others will balance the voice of those special people around with their own thoughts, and shape their learning and growth as a result of this.

Advent is a great time for this sort of activity. Traditionally, Advent is a time of waiting and preparation; it is the start of the Christian year. When better to engage in some personal planning?

So, how do the two sermons fit into this?

The Words of Bishop George

Well, Bishop George, when he spoke on All Saints, picked up a theme outlined in the Ephesians reading. His words, carefully structured, were also delightfully littered with thoughts and ideas. One of these in particular struck home.

In my own words, he seemed to be suggesting that when you look at our bookcases the collection of material you see very often does not represent the reading of an active and searching mind. He also asked the rhetorical question of our confidence in professionals, physicians or lawyers, who did not keep up-to-date with new research and thinking; or with new legislation or understanding.

So I've checked out the bookcase. Of course the novels, work based and other reading will continue, but my Advent development plan will include some more spiritual, doctrinal and theological content. This seems to me to be a useful objective for most of us to consider.

The Words of Father Paul

During his Remembrance Day sermon Fr. Paul echoed some of Bishop George's thoughts but from a slightly different perspective. His sounded more like a health regime. I know that following Christmas we are tempted to develop New Year resolutions about fitness and weight loss, but Fr. Paul's health programme was suggesting an alternative – 'Soul Work'.

This again made me think – it was only part of what he was talking about, but it fell easily into my thinking concerning development plans and growth. Essentially my thinking was about how we train for something. If there's a significant objective or challenge ahead, then we tend to put some effort into the preparation, we structure our training to give us the best chance of success. Now if 'soul work' is training through prayer, meditation and contemplation how much structure do I put into these activities? Or does it just happen by default?

So I've checked out my 'soul work' plan for next year. I'm not going to fall into the trap of over planning – I need the room for flexibility and opportunity. But I shall give the year some more structure, perhaps with an objective. Again, this seems to me to be a subject for each one of us to reflect upon.

The Advent Season

Advent, the start of the Christian year, is a time of waiting and preparation. We share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah which we celebrate with the Nativity; and we prepare ourselves for the Second Coming, the *parousia*. What better time for some focus on our own growth and development?

With every blessing

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Charles Sutton', written in a cursive style.

The Wisdom of Darkness

On All Souls Day, Fr Charles gave a short meditative homily that explored the wisdom to be found in darkness. The version printed here is developed from his notes.

Here in the Northern Hemisphere, our world enters the darker half of the year. The earth starts to prepare for winter, it sheds what's not needed for the winter months, it seems to slow down and look inwards. Energy is stored and creation lies quietly, ready for the re-birth with the coming of spring.

In this time of natural darkness, in our world of artificial light, we can forget that darkness has wisdom. In our busyness of life, the opportunity to lie fallow in winter is overlooked. In our busyness, and unlike our ancestors, we don't really take the time to contemplate our own mortality in the darkness of winter.

I am reminded of the Surrealist artist Joan Miro; in his work he frequently challenges the viewer with a deeply symbolic question.

"Is it in the light, or in the dark, that you can see most clearly?"

In the light you can see the distant horizon, and perhaps be dazzled by the sun. But in the dark you can see the distant stars, your sight covers the millennia of light years, the created universe becomes your field of view.

"Yes," he says, "it is in the dark that you see."

Our Celtic predecessors believed that in the darkness of winter the fabric of the universe thinned. And at this time Heaven and Earth could whisper together across the luminous veil.

The German poet Rainer Rilke, following an extended period living in a Russian Monastic house, wrote a collection of poems 'The Book of Hours'. In one of the poems, associated with the close of day, he wrote:

*'The darkness embraces everything,
it lets me imagine a great presence
stirring beside me.
I believe in the night.'*

Christian mystics and spiritual thinkers have long been informed by their meditation on darkness. It can perhaps be seen as one of the aspects of apophatic theology which serves to describe God by what 'he' is not, rather than what 'he' is. I am minded to think that much of the world's religious strife is created through people's claims of what God is, and not through what 'he' is not.

It is, they say, in the wisdom of darkness that we can see that God is larger than we can imagine; in the wisdom of darkness many of the beliefs we hold so dear are challenged and found to be wanting.

Maybe, just maybe, as the fabric of creation thins, and Heaven and Earth whisper together across the luminous veil we can hear the light words:

*'release your tight grip
on what you think you know.'*

Perhaps today, on All Souls Day, in this season of darkness we can learn to see a little more clearly.

At a time when, as Rilke describes, we can feel a great presence stirring beside us.

When Paul reminds us, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, of the great cloud of witnesses, of whom we are part.

And as we state, in the Apostolic Creed, our firm belief in the communion of saints.

So that we can see our place and part in the stirring presence, honouring those who have gone before us.

And saying clearly
that the lives lived before mine matter.

Our lives are embedded in the lives of those who precede us. Whether they are known and loved members of family, or friends, or have inspired us through their existence. Or are unknown to us, yet have served to shape our lives, perhaps through their worship in this place.

Today we remember them; we give thanks for their lives. And we know that in our increasing understanding of them we begin to know ourselves a little better.

'Men in Waiting'

During Advent, there are three Tuesday evening Masses, they will build toward the Christmas Festival. Each Mass will be dedicated to, and explore the theme, of a 'Man in Waiting'. Each will include a short homily and meditation.

Zechariah

Tuesday 3 December 1900 Mass

Father of John the Baptist,
Priest of the Sons of Aaron,
Husband of Elizabeth
and Cousin of Mary, the Mother of Jesus

A Man foreseeing God

John the Baptist

Tuesday 10 December 1900 Mass

Son of Zechariah,
A Voice in the Wilderness,
Descendent of Aaron,
And Victim of Herod

A Man sent from God

Joseph of Nazareth

Tuesday 17 December 1900 Mass

Husband of Mary,
Son of Kings,
A Distant presence,
And Father of Our Lord

A Man who cared for God

***Special* ADVENT COLLECTION**

**Each Sunday in Advent we will
be collecting non-perishable
food for the
NE Bristol Food Bank**

**Food banks meet a very real
need. Our contributions will help
those in need as they prepare for
Christmas**

PLEASE HELP

**See suggested list of items
and bring them along each Sunday**

Book Review

JOHNSON, Revd Dr Malcolm DIARY OF A GAY PRIEST: The Tightrope Walker (Pub Christian Alternative, Winchester UK; Washington USA) 2013 £9.99

This diary starts on 17 June 1962, the day of Fr Johnson's priesting in Portsmouth Cathedral. He has led an interesting life, having served as a subaltern in the Royal Norfolk Regiment for his National Service, and there is a photograph of him in uniform looking very beautiful and elegant; he then went on to Durham; he says *Durham was a constant inspiration to me, and most days I would pray there*. I empathise with him totally, it is an amazing Cathedral.

The introduction to the book gives a potted version of his life and his knowledge of always knowing he was gay, though he did marry, the marriage lasted about 18 months. He has lived with his partner, Robert, for 40 years.

He trained for the ordained ministry at Cuddesdon, a theological college that has produced some very interesting ordinands.

He is a Mason, a member of the Athenaeum, rather indiscreet at times, and a name-dropper, which at first I found a little off-putting, but that was hugely overshadowed by his ministry at St Botolph's, Aldgate, where he was a great inspiration to a friend of mine, one of his curates Revd Nerissa Jones. He turned St Botolph's into a centre for the homeless, and also founded hostels for the homeless; he did a tremendous amount of work supporting gay clergy, and those with HIV+ and AIDs (a number of them clergy), and took many funerals of those who had died of AIDs in the 1990s. A year or so after his leaving St Botolph's the work with the homeless collapsed.

He argued with a number of bishops, but was also respected by others, +Graham Leonard, +George Cassidy and ++ George Carey do not come out well in the diary, but that is to be expected in the light of their conservative theology. In July 2006 ++Rowan awarded him an MA Lambeth degree for his work with the homeless and the gay community.

His final diary entry is 31 July 2012, where he says he conducted the funeral of Eric Sykes and says his visit to Eric's widow and three daughters was a riot – *'so much laughter as they remembered him'*.

The book ends with a postscript where he says,
'Since the age of ten I have always felt an outsider and still am.'

I would recommend this book, whatever your views are on gay clergy, it is a picture of a very human, very gifted man who lives the Gospel with those on the very edge of society, in fact a 'wonky' saint (as I spoke about on All Saints Sunday).

Liz Badman, Parish Reader (Licensed Lay Minister)

“The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the gentiles; in him the gentiles shall hope” (Romans 15:12)

If we look at the genealogy, the family tree of our Lord Jesus Christ at the beginning of St Matthew’s gospel, we find, in three distinct sections, an ancestry of Jesus. The name of Jesse, the father of King David, comes at the end of the first section, and then the second section begins with David. It’s interesting that when this family tree is shown in stained glass, it’s known as a Jesse Window. Well-known examples in this country are to be seen in Wells Cathedral, Dorchester Abbey and St George’s Hanover Square. Perhaps the most impressive is the one in Chartres Cathedral, where Jesse is shown at the bottom of the tree lying on a couch, and from his loins rises the stem which branches out into scrolls, enclosing seated figures of his sons. He had 8, of whom David was the youngest. At the time of his being chosen as Israel’s anointed King, David was seemingly the least among his brothers, the shepherd boy.

Besides an advent wreath, another exercise during this season is the creation of a Jesse Tree - putting a branch in a pot, and as the season of Advent progresses, hanging on it symbols of the different ancestors of Our Lord, or if one wants a wider choice, key people in Israel’s history. Thus symbols might include a tent for Abraham, a ladder for Jacob, grain for Ruth, and so on. A Jesse tree, however simply made, could provide a powerful tool for meditation on the unfolding of God’s love and redemption plan for his people from the dawn of time. But what of the **root**?

St Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, when he mentions the root of Jesse, is quoting from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 11. *“A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”* Isaiah goes on to describe his vision of the Messiah and the Kingdom of righteousness and peace over which he will reign, when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Now, if we return to Matthew’s genealogy, and its three sections aforementioned, the first gives the list of ancestors from Abraham to Jesse, the middle section goes from David until the time of the deportation to Babylon, and the third from after the deportation until the birth of Jesus. Isaiah was prophesying in that third time, after Israel’s downfall and exile, and some 400 years after the time of King David. He is looking back to Israel’s golden age of the Kings, and contemplating its present age as being like a forest with its boughs lopped, the tallest trees cut down, the lofty brought low, Lebanon with its majestic trees fallen. A lifeless forest about to be cleared out. But the roots are still there; one root in particular, and from that root will come the Hope of Israel, the Messiah, a physical and spiritual restoration.

Isaiah speaks of the **earth** being full of the knowledge of the Lord. He is seeing the big picture, and Paul, the great Jewish apostle to the Gentiles, takes it up. He makes it clear that **through** Israel and the promises given to the patriarchs, the gospel is brought to the rest of the world, to the Gentiles. The quotation from Isaiah in the Letter to the Romans follows three others: from the second Book of Samuel, from Deuteronomy and from Psalm 117, all there to give weight to the Gentiles’ sharing of the Good News, as was God’s intention from the start.

The Scriptures were written, as Paul tells us, so that we might be encouraged in **hope**, the hope of Israel’s Messiah, the call of all the nations to salvation and praise. In that remarkable address in Acts 13 given at Antioch, Paul traces the history of Israel with brilliant succinctness, saying at one point, referring to David, “Of this man’s posterity God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised”. Perhaps the most dazzling and consummate of Paul’s gifts is the interpretation of the

Old Testament for us as followers of Christ, who is the fulfilment of the Old Testament Law and Prophets.

The last recorded “I am” from Jesus comes in the epilogue of the Book of Revelation: “I am the Root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” Not just **from** the root of Jesse but the Root **itself** - the Root of salvation. The Root without which we as the Church can produce nothing of worth, no branches, no growth of any kind. We can no more do without Christ than a tree without its root. By baptism we are grafted into that Root. As one Advent carol has it,

This shoot shall grow a goodly tree,
An holy vine and true,
Wherein whoe'er **engrafted** be
Is born and lives anew.

If we desire to be kept “in the hope that we have grasped”, as the old post Communion prayer puts it, we must be refreshed by **the** Root. Thus nourished, so might we become more like it, less distinguishable from it, one with Christ as both Child and as Church.

Jessica Smith, Parish Lay Minister

EPIPHANY SHARED LUNCH

Sunday 5th January 2014

A great way to celebrate together at Epiphany

*Sign the list in the porch to give us
an idea what sort of food you are
going to bring.*

Pay bar available

Come – Bring – Share – Enjoy

Another event organised by All Saints Social & Welcoming for all to enjoy.
Any queries to Janice Hopkins

HYMN BOOK SEARCH the 12th and last

Fivefold Snowfall?
It's Christina Rossetti (28)
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,

Snow on snow
kds

Madge's seat

Madge Arnold died 6 years ago. She was a faithful part of All Saints and Cotham Parish Church and a great organiser. A former leader of our local Mothers' Union branch and at deanery level, Madge had a love for the theatre and for choral music and worship. Indeed, she generously left All Saints a bequest to support choral worship and this funds the bursaries we use to encourage young student singers in our choir.

Madge had a particular affinity with the Bristol Old Vic and in her memory her friends contributed a not inconsiderable sum towards the re-seating of the theatre. This is now completed and Madge's seat can be found in the dress circle, seat A33, complete with plaque. A fitting memorial to a faithful, hardworking and energetic lady.

Roger & Janice Hopkins
Madge's Executors

The best mince pies?

One of the challenges of Advent is surely the agonising that goes on over whether to make or buy the Christmas mince pies, and if the choice is to buy, then which one and from where?

Readers will be heartened to know that Friday morning mass-goers have it sorted.

For some time now, Fr Peter Dill hosts after mass coffee in his flat across the road from All Saints. Over the months, holiday biscuits and treats have been enjoyed and commented on. The good news is that mince pies from various shops have now been sampled, with a clear majority winner a week before Which? magazine came to the same conclusion. Who is this purveyor of top pastry delight? Aldi is the one. They beat a well known London store in the national contest. Yes, apparently Fortnum's came last of all with a very poor but expensive showing.

So, the decision has been made. Our pre-crib service refreshments will have nothing but the best, which thankfully, is also the cheapest.

Janice Hopkins

(This article should have appeared in the November magazine, but due to problems with my emails the editor did not receive it in time. LB)

MECHTILD of MAGDEBURG

The thirteenth century was a time of spiritual awakening, of a sense of joy in natural beauty transfused with religious longing. It was a time when young noblemen went off to the Crusades, while their womenfolk stayed at home, and the unmarried women in particular wrote of their overpowering devotion to Christ. It was a time of the Cult of Courtly Love in the secular world, and of the Cult of the Virgin Mary, which had reached excessive levels, in the Church.

Mechtild of Magdeburg was born around 1210 in the diocese of Magdeburg in East Germany. She joined a community of Beguines when she was 23 and was a Beguine for almost 40 years. She entered the Cistercian convent of Helfta as an old woman in around 1270.

She started experiencing visions around the age of 12. At this time she was aware of such an overpowering sense of the Holy Spirit that she said that she "could no longer have given away to daily sins" and from then on the centre of her direction changed. In spite of this she was never austere, she was aware of beauty and she was not withdrawn from her fellows. She saw God in all things. When she was about 23 her longing for a more spiritual life made her leave home and she went to Magdeburg where she knew one person. She avoided being with that person because she thought the friendship would interfere with her renunciation of the world and her love of God. It is not known if this friend was male or female. She joined a community of Beguines.

She wrote most of her mystical visions before she joined the convent at Helfta, as her confessor, the Dominican Heinrich of Halle had encouraged her to write them down. There are seven books which make up the whole book called "The Flowing Light of the Godhead". Mechtild introduces the whole work with the following,

"This book is to be joyfully welcomed for God Himself speaks in it, "I now send forth as a messenger to all spiritual people both good and bad - for if the pillars (i.e. the clergy) fall, the building cannot stand. The book proclaims Me alone and shows forth My holiness with praise. All who would understand this book should read it nine times." Mechtild asks God, "What shall this book be called?" God replies, "It shall be called "The Flowing Light of the Godhead" into all hearts which shall dwell therein without falseness".

Her in spiritual imagery is quite often erotic and is expressed through the amorous imagery of the courtly love lyric. She talks of "flowing" and of "fusion" and in her experiences she feels united with God and there is a mystical interchange of possessing and being possessed by God who is her Beloved.

There are two directions in her book - prophetic and contemplative. She was influenced by the writings of Hildegard of Bingen, Bernard of Clairvaux and Joachim of Flora. However, her main theme is that of Love.

It would seem that Mechtild came from a noble or well-born family as her visions are graphically described in terms of white-robed maidens in rose-coloured cloaks and handsome young men with gifts of flowers and her imagery also embraces the pageantry of crowns, princes and banners. Christ's suffering was central to her and her intense need to suffer with him through loneliness, illness and persecution. She was afraid of the implications of her own mysticism and was very much aware and afraid of the dangers of power. Her image of Mary is that of Mother and Mediator (which is a very Medieval image), but more frequently she uses Mary as a symbol for the Soul.

Although she shows the Soul as a *"submissive, meek and hesitant maiden who finds courting (i.e. asserting herself) difficult this Soul is nonetheless passionately joined with God in union*

that transcends awareness of self or sin and is frequently described in images of heat and light". She sees God as Lover and Spouse and with God we are ravished in delight.

She was ill for many years from "conquering her body and disciplining her soul and she became worn out by austerity and desire, and she became severely ill. However, after this she felt that *"the mighty love of God struck her so powerfully with it's wonders"* that she felt inwardly compelled to write down what God had told her. She felt that God had called her and would look after her. She then spent fifteen years writing down her visions. She criticised the State and the Church because the clergy were neglecting their duties and the convents were being run in a very slack manner. Because she openly denounced these abuses,

"Alas, O Crown of Holy Church, How dim thou art become! Thy precious stones have fallen (the rulers and the holy doctors) because thou dost wound and injure holy Christian faith."(6)

For this she was persecuted and deprived of communion and Daily Offices in the choir. There were rumours that she was a heretic. She was old and frail and losing her sight by this time, so she sought protection of the Cistercian convent of Helfte in Saxony. After this she became ill again and lost her sight completely. Her helplessness and poverty did not get her down, she felt that she was clothed in the wedding garments of the Soul and described as,

"When maidens are always clothed according to the will of their Bridegroom, they need nothing but the Bridal gown; that is to say they are rich in pain, illness, days of sadness, temptation and the many kinds of suffering we find in sinful Christianity. These are the wedding garments of the loving Soul"

Her spirituality is very much of the High Middle Ages, but worth reading for us today, for its beauty alone.

She died in 1297 in her 87th year.

The Church remembers Mechtild on 19 November.

All Saints Parish Retreat 2014

"See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Corinthians 6. 2)

Exploring the present moment

This year our Parish Retreat is the weekend of 7 – 9 February 2014 at Abbey House, Glastonbury.

Those of you who have been on our retreats before will be able to extol the virtues of Abbey House to others and encourage them to join us in February. Abbey House is a large, elegant early 19th century house set in beautiful gardens overlooking the Abbey ruins. It is peaceful, comfortable, warm, and the food is excellent and there is a bar – all to ensure 48 hours of spirituality and 'winding down' from the stresses of our everyday life. We gather together for Morning and Evening Prayer each day, but if you oversleep and don't appear, that is OK. The delights of Glastonbury with its interesting High Street and the beauties of the countryside are an additional attraction. Many of us take advantage of a weekend in the country to intersperse our spiritual activities with fresh air – and there is always the Tor to climb.

Our Retreat Conductor this year is Revd Canon Wendy Wilby, whom some of you will have known as Precentor at Bristol Cathedral. Canon Wendy has now retired with her husband Philip to Yorkshire and they are living in a windmill. She is deeply spiritual leader and I feel assured that we will come away refreshed and renewed.

This year the cost of the Retreat will be £136 each. There have been changes at the Retreat House and the Trustees have put the cost up, but as a Church Group we still get a good discount. We also invite you to contribute between £2.50 and £3 towards a card and £50 book token for the Retreat Conductor.

Please think hard about this opportunity and sign up in the porch, soon as there is interest from other churches. You will not regret it. Where else would you find 48 hours full board in such glorious surroundings for such a low cost? Perhaps you could bring a friend along as well.

We will have to ask for a non-returnable deposit of £30 to book a place, the remainder to be paid on arrival at Abbey House. Please make deposit cheques out to All Saints with St John, and hand them into to me, Liz Badman, or to Norman Drewett in an envelope marked 'Retreat Deposit'.

Please sign list in porch. .

For further details please contact Liz Badman at All Saints, Clifton on 0117-9741355 or allsaintsclifton@tiscali.co.uk

Liz Badman
Parish Administrator

Rosemary for Remembrance

A special ceremony took place at All Saints Church on Remembrance Sunday, as it does every year. Before the solemn mass, the clergy, choir and congregation gathered around the war memorial. The choir sang the Russian Kontakion for the departed, and sprigs of rosemary were dipped in holy water and sprinkled around the memorial, where it grows in abundance.

It has been associated with memory since ancient times, both as a symbol of fidelity and of remembrance, and as a cordial to refresh the memory. Perhaps the most famous quote relating to rosemary is that of Ophelia in Hamlet, who says to her brother Laertes "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember". She has been driven mad by the murder of her father, and is urging Laertes to avenge his death, and not forget him.

Thomas More wrote about the rosemary growing in his garden, saying that "I let it runne all over my garden walls, not onlie because my bees love it, but because it is the herb sacred to remembrance, and, therefore, to friendship".

We find references to rosemary in early printed herbals. Dodoens Rembert's Herbal was translated by Henry Lyte and printed in 1578, and he describes the shrub and gives its medicinal uses. It is classified according to the humours as 'hot and dry in the second degree'. He quotes the classical writers Dioscorides and Galen, who "do write that this rosemary boyled in water, and giuen to drinke in the morning fasting & before labor or exercice, cureth the launders (jaundice)". He then refers to "The Arrabians and their successours Physitions, (who) do say that Rosemarie comforteth the brayne, the memory, and the inwarde Sences, & that it restoreth speach,

especially the conserue made of the floures thereof with Sugar, to be receyued dayly fasting". This would suggest that the association of rosemary with memory may have originated with the Arab physicians of the Middle Ages. John Gerard, writing at the end of the 16th century, adds that rosemary "is good for all infirmities of the head and braine, proceeding of a cold and moist cause, for they dry the brain, quicken the senses and memorie, and strengthen the sinewie parts".

W.T. Fernie, a medical doctor and herbalist writing in the late 19th century (his book *Herbal Simples* was published in Bristol in 1895) tells us it originated in the Levant, and was introduced to England before the Norman conquest. In his day, it was still sometimes laid on the coffin at funerals, and distributed among the mourners. Spirit of rosemary was also sold by druggists, and taken both as a restorative and to relieve depression.

Mrs Grieve writes in the *Modern Herbal* (published in 1931) that it was used to deck churches during festivals, as incense in religious ceremonies and at weddings to symbolise fidelity. Anne of Cleves apparently wore it at her wedding to Henry VIII, though it didn't do her much good! Mrs Grieve reports that in 1607, Dr Roger Hacket described it in a sermon thus: "it helpeth the brain, strengtheneth the memorie and is very medicinable for the head".

These traditional uses appear to be supported by modern research, which has revealed that it is a strong antioxidant, and by studies in which volunteers who inhaled rosemary essential oil showed increased alertness. *Julian Barker, medical herbalist and author of The Medicinal Flora of Britain and Northwestern Europe, says that its essential oil was one of the first to be extracted by steam distillation. He states that it is good for clear-headedness on account of its neurovascular activity, though cautions against prolonged use or use in high doses. It has many other applications, both as a medicinal and culinary herb. For culinary use, he recommends macerating sprigs in olive oil or vinegar to baste or marinade the food.*

You may like to try Dr Fernie's recipe for rosemary wine: chop up sprigs of rosemary, and pour on them some sound white wine, which after two or three days may be strained off and used. Drink in moderation, otherwise it is unlikely to improve your memory!

1 *Rosmarinum Coronarium.*
Garden Rosemarie.



Garden rosemary – woodcut illustration from John Gerard's 'Herball or Generall historie of plantes', published in 1597
Thanks to the Wellcome Library and Early English Books Online for providing access to their resources

Earthing Christmas

As we approach the festivities of Christmas, Bishop Lee reflects on holding together hope and warning in the coming of the Christ child.

Some of you will know that one of the blessings I have discovered as a result of my chemotherapy is going to a midweek late showing at the cinema. It started after Simon Mayo and Mark Kermode had given me a great desire to see 'Rush' – a retelling of the rivalry between Formula 1 racers Nicky Lauda and James Hunt. On that occasion I went to a sparsely populated theatre with my daughter and since then I have seen 'Captain Phillips' and, last night, 'Gravity', with other friends. The fact that the steroid premedication keeps me up most of the night has been one driver while the fact that 'chemo' falls on a Wednesday has also helped (we have a mobile phone with the Two for One Film offer for Wednesday.)

'Gravity' turned out to be cinematically awesome, especially in 3D, and a gripping story. Without wanting to spoil any plot line, at one point in the movie Dr Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) is trying to connect with Houston or another Space Station but only manages to link with a Chinese amateur radio ham. As he only speaks Chinese, and Ryan doesn't, it is a recipe for frustration but two noises in the background lead to a flow of emotion. The second of these is the sound of a baby.

At first we see hope kindled in Ryan, her demeanour changes and she is totally absorbed by the infant. But the child's presence then opens her up to repressed feelings of grief and loss; from hope and a future Ryan loses her sense of both.

'Gravity' may be complete fiction but, as with the best that Hollywood produces, it explores the realities of what it means to be human. The day after Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines, the newscasters carried reports of Emily Sagales, the 21 year old who had given birth to a girl in the midst of the devastation caused by 170 mph winds. Emily had had to swim through the floods and hold on for dear life before finding safety in the smashed airport. There was great celebration and the baby was named Bea Joy after Emily's mother; but the delight was mixed with grief as her mother, Beatrice, had been carried away in the deadly storm. With no sanitation or clean water Bea Joy now runs the very real risk of catching a life-threatening infection.

In Syria, a country torn apart by civil war, hatred and violence, babies are still being born and longed for. They stand as both a sign of hope, and a warning – what have human beings descended to when they want to wipe children and infants from the face of the planet?

Hope and warning are very much held together through the Festival of Christmas, including in many of our carols. Jesus, as the prologue of St John's gospel records, was full of and grace *and* truth; the world did not recognise him and his own did not receive him. The readings for the days following Christmas Day itself are very challenging – the martyrdom of Stephen for 'Boxing Day' and the slaughter of the innocents for 28 December. Given that congregations will understandably be expecting uplifting themes of Love, Peace, Joy and Hope, these sombre notes need careful handling by preachers. But all of them have to be earthed – a very appropriate word as we proclaim the incarnation of God in Christ – in the reality of a light which names the darkness, yet proclaims it will not have the last word.

Something of this was reflected in a conversation I had some time ago with a couple in their thirties who were being confirmed. After the service I asked them why they had made this

decision. Their answer caused me to feel both sadness and joy, “We started coming to church after we lost our child.” Christ met them in their pain and sorrow and gave them hope and a new future. Let us pray for more encounters like this in our churches, and especially over Christmas.

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