

Vicar's letter – January 2015

A very Happy New Year to you!

The Christmas tree has been recycled. The decorations are boxed for another year. Everybody is in the gym, and we have absolutely no intention of eating another mince pie for at least 11 months. But Epiphany, celebrated on 6th January reminds us that the meaning of Christmas lasts longer than the festive period.

Epiphany is sometimes referred to as 'the manifestation of Christ'. Put more simply it means, 'making Christ obvious to the world'. Traditionally, the Church has used the visit of the Magi to illustrate her point. They bring three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Gold, as we know well, is a rare and costly metal. It has always been a symbol of wealth and a celebration of status and permanence. It was hoarded by those in power, particularly monarchs and emperors. Christian theologians have seen this gift as a mysterious clue that the baby in the stable would grow to become the great Jewish King or Messiah of ancient promise.

Frankincense comes from trees found in the Middle East. When burnt it gives off a lovely, intoxicating fragrance. It was used in religious services, across the ancient near east, as a physical expression of worship; the incense would rise like prayers to God in heaven. Many see, in this gift, a clue about the divinity of Christ – not just God with us, but God as one of us.

Myrrh comes from small thorn bushes found in east Africa and south Asia. It was often used in perfumes and for make-up. However, it was also commonly applied to dead bodies as part of the embalming process. Is this gift a clue about the ultimate destiny of the baby when he grew up?

Epiphany reminds us that when God came to be with us, it wasn't in the developed, physical, self-sufficiency of manhood. It was in the dependence and vulnerability of a new born. In the animal's food trough lay a God, who for love's sake, took no short cut to understanding human nature. The Incarnate Love was not at home in fortresses and palaces where it could be protected and lauded. It does not belong in libraries or museums to be merely a subject of study or debate. It cannot even be joined on Facebook or followed on Twitter!

Gold, frankincense and myrrh – strange presents indeed. Gifts for a King born in a stable who would own very little. Who, although divinely pure, would befriend the moral 'flotsam and jetsam' of society, and promise them a place in his heaven. Who would be despised and rejected, betrayed, beaten and buried.....and yet who would transform history and haunt the minds of believers and unbelievers alike with the enticing hope of new way of living.

Many of us make resolutions at the beginning of a new year. If I am honest, mine tend not to make it to February! In January we often reflect on the successes, joys, failures and mistakes of the last year. We look forward with optimism and hope that this new year will be the best yet. However, life is unpredictable and joy and woe are often woven fine in the experience of many people. So how do we face the future? Is there a better way than trusting ourselves to the loving care of our Lord?

Minnie Louise Haskins (1875-1957) grew up in Warmley, Bristol. She lectured in Social Sciences at the London School of Economics from 1919 to 1944, and also enjoyed writing poetry. In 1908, her poem 'God Knows' was published as part of a collection entitled 'The

Desert'. King George VI quoted from the first part of the poem in his Christmas broadcast in 1939. It gave encouragement and hope to the nation at the start of the Second World War, and the words remain an inspiring call to faith at the beginning of a new year.

*'I said to the man
who stood at the Gate of the Year:
"Give me a light
that I may tread safely into the unknown."
And he replied:
"Go out into the darkness
and put your hand into the hand of God.
That shall be to you
better than light,
and safer than a known way."'*

Fr Kim Taplin

THANK YOU

Liz, Barrie, Hélène, Sarah and Paul wish to thank all of you who supported us with cards, emails, good wishes, hugs on the death of Ray Racy – father, father-in-law, grandfather and grandfather-in-law. We were overwhelmed with the help and support we received for the funeral and the reception afterwards.

All Saints Parish Retreat 2015

This year our Parish Retreat is the weekend of 6 – 8 February 2015 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 Fr Richard Williams, Parish Priest of Sr Mary's, Hay-on-Wye., who some of you will know from a previous retreat.

The cost of the Retreat will be **£140** 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. **Please think hard about this opportunity** and sign up in the porch. 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.

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

BENEDICTION

In its widest sense, the word Benediction means the blessing by word or action of a person or an object, but in its more usual and specialised sense it refers to the service, or rite, of Benediction of (or by, or with,) the Blessed Sacrament, which, in its present form, dates from about the seventeenth century. It was seldom seen in England until the Catholic revival brought about by the Oxford Movement and the nineteenth century Ritualists, and even then, more often than not, in secret, due, presumably, to its perceived non-compliance with the Thirty Nine Articles.

Although it does not include the actual consecration of the elements, the rite of Benediction is Eucharistic in nature, and assumes complete understanding and acceptance of the twin doctrines of Transubstantiation and the Real Presence. Mass and Benediction stand together – the latter cannot exist without the former

One of the greatest attractions of Benediction, from a liturgical point of view, is its great flexibility. It can stand on its own, usually as an afternoon or evening service, or as a conclusion to Vespers or Evensong, to Compline, or, as at the great festival of the Blessed Sacrament, to Mass. In this latter case, Benediction in effect constitutes the Blessing and Dismissal at the end of Mass. Frequently, Benediction is combined with Vespers or Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, thus uniting Marian and Eucharistic devotion.

The very essence of Benediction is the exposure, or Exposition, of the body of Our Lord, usually in a monstrance, sometimes raised on a throne, on the Altar, surrounded by candles. This Exposition, which often includes periods of silent adoration interspersed with prayers, meditation or readings or a homily, may take place before the actual rite of Benediction or be incorporated in the service, between the singing of *O salutaris* and *Tantum ergo*. This second arrangement makes for a tighter-knit form of service, particularly if Benediction is preceded by Vespers, etc.

If Evensong or another Office precedes Benediction, most Roman liturgical books allow for the monstrance containing the Host to be placed on the Altar from the commencement of the Office. In this case, clergy and servers must take great care not to turn their backs on the Blessed Sacrament as they go about their business. If the Office includes *Magnificat*, both the Host and the Altar are censed – not that easy to carry out with the requisite dignity and reverence. However, it does allow a more seamless service as a whole, there being no break for the lighting of candles etc.

It should be noted that there is another, somewhat watered-down, version of this service, which goes by the name of Devotions to the Blessed Sacrament. In this case, the Host, instead of being exposed in a monstrance, is placed on the Altar in a veiled ciborium; Our Lord is, presumably present, though not visibly so. This form of devotion was popular in churches of the Tractarian tradition some 60 years ago, and was said to be more likely to warrant the episcopal Nelsonian eye!

The “core” of the rite of Benediction is, and always has been, the hymn *Tantum ergo* (*Therefore we before him bending*), the Prayer or Collect, and the Blessing of the people with the Host. What surrounds this core must serve only to emphasize it, in a similar way to the rest of the Mass emphasizing, or “pointing up”, the consecration of the elements. A survey of the content of a typical Benediction service will explain this further.

If not already *in situ* for a preceding Office, the Blessed Sacrament, in a monstrance, is placed on the Altar by the Priest or Deacon, and the bells are rung to announce the beginning of the rite. If the place of reservation for the Blessed Sacrament is away from the Sanctuary, the Host may be brought to the Altar in solemn procession, either by the Priest or the Deacon, wearing the humeral veil, and accompanied by incense and lights.

After a suitable versicle and response, uniting priest and people in the rite, an opening hymn of adoration is sung, traditionally *O salutaris hostia* (*O saving victim, opening wide*) during which the Priest and servers reverence the Sacrament by bowing low and then cense It.

The period which follows is at the same time a wonderful opportunity and a minefield to the unwary. If the Host is to be carried in solemn procession for adoration by the people (either in the church or in the surrounding streets) this is the most appropriate time to do this. Alternatively, prayers or Intercessions may be offered, but very great care must be taken to ensure their suitability. There is a considerable number of appropriate readings, biblical and other (including by St Thomas Aquinas and Cardinal Newman); quiet meditation or simply silent adoration may here be inserted.

This time of quiet preparation brings us to the core of this great service. During the singing of *Tantum ergo*, all bow low before the Sacrament, which is then again censed by the Priest. This great hymn of praise to the Blessed Sacrament was written, as was *O salutaris*, by St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and translated by John Mason Neale (1818-1866); thus great theologians of the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries combine in praise of Our Lord in “this great Sacrament.”

The Collect follows; by tradition, the Priest stands as is the custom when he addresses God. The Collect itself, attributed to Aquinas, is of note in that it addresses Our Lord Jesus Christ directly as God, the second person of the Trinity, and is one of the very few Collects to do so.

There are a number of versions in use in, for instance, the USA and South Africa, which follow ASB in adapting Aquinas’ original Collect to address God the Father. The point of this is hard to understand. It is as if Aquinas is giving us, in passing, a lesson in the Trinitarian nature of God.

At this point, on some occasions, a suitable short motet may be sung, for instance a setting of *Ave, verum corpus*, or verses from the sequence *Lauda, Sion* (Aquinas).

The high point of the rite is reached after the Collect, when the Priest dons the humeral veil, takes up the monstrance, and holding it through the folds of the veil, blesses the people by making the sign of the cross over them with the monstrance three times. The Sacrament is censed, bells are rung, all bow low. This is surely the supreme moment in all Catholic liturgy!

To quote John MacQuarrie, a twentieth century theologian, a remarkable thing then happens. Led by the Priest, we say the Divine Praises - "Blessed be God, Blessed be his Holy Name." We came to ask for God's blessing, now we are blessing God! We have received God's blessing, and our response is to bless and adore God; in rather more mundane terms, thanking him for this blessing. This makes it difficult to understand the suggestion of some liturgists that the Divine Praises may be used as a meditation before the actual blessing.

The Host is normally returned to the Tabernacle by the Priest or Deacon, during which an acclamation (often Psalm 117) is sung. The bells are rung as the Tabernacle door closes, to signify the end of the rite.

A small point which may interest liturgical purists. For many years, incense was not blessed by the Priest when put on before the exposed Sacrament. However, modern (Roman) thinking is that if incense is to be offered in adoration of Our Lord, it may be blessed in his name beforehand.

By virtue of combining quiet, at times almost introspective, meditative prayer with intense visual adoration, Benediction is one of the most powerful services in catholic liturgy. It is the evening service (6.00pm) at All Saints on the first Sunday of each month, when it immediately follows BCP Evensong. The devoted band of priests, servers and singers would appreciate your company.

Chris Verity

IN THIS MONTH.... JANUARY 1931

An excerpt from the Vicar's (Canon Gillson's) notes

There is at last good news of the prospect of a Retreat House in the neighbourhood of Bristol. Ever since the year of the National Mission we have been hoping for one. In the summer of that year a whole series of Retreats were held in Clifton Hill House, they were well attended and all who took part, both men and women, begged that a permanent Retreat House should be established so that the annual Retreat might be part of their regular life's programme. No opportunity presented itself, and I fear that many of those retreatants have never been to a retreat since. Now that we are to have one, I hope they will remember their happy experiences and good resolves and avail themselves of opportunities that will be given.

The House in question, as some of you know, is the Abbey House, Glastonbury. It stands off the main road, and so far away from traffic, to the east of the ruins and looking down on them from rising ground. It is a large house, able to accommodate twenty retreatants at least, I hope. There are beautiful gardens belonging, and country walks at the back. Its position in relation to the Abbey and its associations is to many a peculiar attraction. A Committee has been meeting during the past year and decided to take the grave responsibility of accepting the offer of the Trustees to take the house for a term of years at the nominal rent of £1a year, the Committee being responsible for repairs and rates, etc. Sufficient money has been subscribed to pay for the necessary alterations and to provide a considerable sum for running expenses for the first five years. I confess that personally I

hesitated at first in supporting the scheme, on two grounds. First, it cannot be denied that the house is difficult to reach from Bristol. The train service is so bad as to be almost useless; the road service takes some time and adds to the cost. My second difficulty is much more serious: Are there any signs that Bristol Church people as a whole have any desire to go into Retreat? It is said that the supply of such a house will go far to create the demand. That most of us need the special help of Retreat if we are to make progress in Christian living there can be no doubt. But we don't always realise our greatest needs. For this reason above all others we need to pray that this venture may be blessed and guided by the Holy Spirit, that many may be moved to use the Retreats and to find in them a new means of growing in the knowledge and love of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Epiphany

Just by the Roman Forum there is a marble arch, nearly two thousand years old. It is the built to celebrate the victory that Titus won in the first Jewish War. Covered in carving, at the top there is Titus himself, flying in to heaven on the back of an eagle. It is what they call an 'apotheosis'; no longer Titus the man, but Titus becoming a god.

That's what Romans believed – that men and women could actually become gods. It probably sounds a bit odd, dreaming of riding to heaven on the wings of an eagle, but the desire to be a bit more than human is actually a pretty basic temptation. Behind it is the idea that I could do better than this, if I try, I could make something of myself. It is the *New Year* temptation, all those resolutions we make to be svelte and shiny and improved.

New Year resolutions are designed to make us better. Whether it is taking something on, like running on the downs every morning, or giving something up, like sherry for breakfast we aim to be better than we are. No harm in that, providing we are alert to the temptation that effort always brings. Standing before the mirror after a run on the downs there's a ghastly tendency to think 'Haven't I done well', a tendency to start admiring myself.

That was the Roman disease. It was, and is, the temptation to aim at being more than human, the temptation to take charge of ourselves. You may think that pride is only for people who are *really* pleased with themselves, a sin for high achievers. It's nothing of the sort. Pride is just another name for the sin that thinks that *I* am the great work in progress and (with a bit more running and a little less sherry) I might finally get it right.

In January we arrive at Epiphany. It is the moment when kings come to meet a baby. It is the moment power bows down to frailty. Epiphany is a lesson about pride and effort. The Kings did not kneel at the crib to admire a superhuman. This first glimpse of the God amongst us, is a glimpse of frailty and dependence. That is how God takes human form.

Christ turned the ambition of Titus on its head. Here was a god who came to us and lived as one of us. Christ was, in fact, the one person who has lived a life in which he neither imposed himself nor apologised for himself. He never sought to be more or less than human. Again and again he resisted the invitation to take charge, impose himself, or do it better. The devil in the wilderness, Pilate in the forum, the crowd at the foot of the cross, and even his own disciples all tempted him to do something more. He would not. He never sought to take charge, he never tried to escape. Christ knew the great good news that it is God, and not our own effort, that will redeem us. Christ was the great good news that it is in being properly human that we can come close to God.

Good luck with your New Year resolutions. I have some myself, but let us make it our chief resolution to praise God and not ourselves.

*The Very Revd Dr David Hoyle
Dean of Bristol*