

Living down our street.

Let us pray: Father God, take this moment, time and space that it might be a place where we can know your presence and rest in your love, to your glory. Amen.

This Sunday, the Sunday between all the preparations and celebration of Christmas, and the New Year, when we start to look ahead again, often feels like a quiet Sunday in the life of the church.

On the one hand, we may still be surrounded by Christmas lights, by decorations, we may have up very near us at this moment colourful cards with pictures of all the Christmas stories, and with lots of robins this year; and by the afterglow of Christmas celebrations; we might be able to visualise the Christmas tree lights shining through the church doors;

but on the other hand, we have the picture in our heads of a church which is closed most of the time, despite the lights of the Christmas tree shining through; you can look up Park Road, and it may look dark and wet, a bit grey, with shops closed or closing, not a lot of business, but for the shop-keepers, a lot of stress. And we have all sorts of feelings about what has gone on this year. Two very different sets of feelings from the pictures in our heads.

I wonder if you are someone who reflects on the good things first or the bad things?

We are still caught up in the mystery of God becoming man, the birth of a baby, the wonder of how it was announced to the shepherds, the wise men. We have walked together through Advent, waiting for Emmanuel, hearing Prophecy, challenged by the message, the song, the vision, the expression of all of them in Jesus. And next week, Epiphany, looking forward with the wise men.

Remembering that first Christmas and all that surrounded the story. But we know too that it is the beginning of Jesus becoming man, living on earth, walking the countryside, preaching and teaching, the beginning of the road to the cross.

Constantly in the Bible we find the prophets and the Apostles reminding the people of where God had been working through their history and that the same God was working through now with them. And we read too, of those terrible moments, and those good moments in the stories of the ordinary people of the Bible. I think it is the way of the Ignatians, in the tradition of Ignatius Loyola, to think of the moments of desolation and the moments of consolation that colour our lives, even each day. The

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hard times of feeling separated even from God, and the good times when God has felt close. The reason we reflect is so that we can become more aware of where God is working now in our lives, and where perhaps we might think or act differently or indeed even start to act at all. For example, Marcus Rashford is one of those people in the news a lot who decided to act to change the bad times where he could.

In Psalm 122 Sue read us the song of a pilgrim, praying for the peace of Jerusalem: and in these words of David, a very comprehensive prayer not only for the peace of the City, the sanctuary, but much wider for the tribes, other nationalities coming together; and then very much for friends and family; and for the community of believers.

Very much as we pray for the world, our nation, our city, our families, our church fellowship. Heartfelt prayer or song as they travelled through dangerous countryside in difficult times.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that the temple and Jerusalem point us towards Christ's coming and the new Jerusalem. He uses the stories of ordinary people of the Old Testament who became extraordinary because of their faith in God and commitment to what he was calling them to do and to become.

Very recently, I read the phrase

God's people now are called to look backwards to the cross, forwards to the promised land, and around us to the kingdom now.

That is exactly what the writer of Hebrews is saying to us today.

Chapter 11: verse 1 says:

" Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. "

We are able to have that faith and confidence because of Christ's coming as a baby, his life and witness, His act of loving self-giving on the cross, the wonder of the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We so often think we want to know so much more – the why's and when's and how's. But do we really want to know?

Faith is confidence in what we hope for, and assurance about what we do not see.

So what will we remember of 2020? I wonder what has stood out for you? I know that for some it has been horrendous, for others peaceful.

It may have been the loneliness of being alone during lockdowns or other restrictions; for some it has been the difficulties of getting hospital or doctor's appointments, the delays and changed times. And for some it has been the extreme painfulness of loss and grief; For others not being able to see family, not having hugs, having to rely on phone calls, becoming dependent. And not been able to worship God together, missing the fellowship of communion even though appreciating the services.

I wonder what you found the hardest thing, the most difficult, in your life and in your walk with God. But as you reflect on the really hard moments, remember that God is with us, Emmanuel, holding us and loving us.

And there have been the good things; our introduction as a fellowship to Zoom, first by Sophie, and always delightfully enabled by Mark. And the way the Leadership Team have stepped up, kept in contact with us all one way or another, worked even more than ever to provide us with ways of sharing worship, of being fellowship, of maintaining a presence together. When we have had the unexpected phone call. Or the regular one we look forward to, a surprise doorstep visitor, a card, a letter.

And so think again, what have been the good moments for you, as an individual and as a fellowship despite everything?

We know the story of the cross, so now let us remain assured in the wonder of the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and look forward to what God is doing now. The Kingdom now and to come. Assurance about what we do not see.

I see the kingdom now in strange places: in the visits of Jonathan and Hugh and Ann to the shops on Park Road, sharing the light; in church being used by FoodCycle on Mondays; in Zoom services and contacts with Fizz and Toddlers and Youth Group; in the Garden House; in all the ways people have found individually and in the community to keep in touch, to share love. We don't even know about many of them. But in whatever way real love is shared, God will use that.

I heard a Rabbi speaking on Radio 4 at Hanukah, saying that there are seven words for gift in Hebrew. And that reminded me of something that a little while ago, Catherine Bright, Sue and Eric's daughter, shared with me.

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There is a website highlighting 5 Love Languages, suggesting that most of the ways in which love is shared can come within five headings. And that people have different ways of feeling loved, and so which way is top of the list for people might vary. So briefly, those five ways are:

1. Words of Affirmation
2. Dedicated time spent with someone
3. A gift
4. An act of service
5. Touch, including a hug.

You might want to think which comes top for you, and what is top for those you love. It may not be what you had thought! And if you are missing using one of them, can you find another instead?

But when you read the stories of Jesus, you will recognise how he demonstrated all of these ways to different people at different times. And sometimes in unusual ways.

At Christmas, we sing a great deal about love; that Love came down at Christmas. Maybe, in this difficult and strange time, we need to think through how we share love. And are there more ways we can be doing it, where we are now?

We don't have all the answers. But we do have the gift, living down our street, God with us, Emmanuel.

May the Kingdom now come even closer, and be even more living down our street, as we share that amazing gift.