

## Christmas Services

In the last newsletter you will have read about the plans for three services over Christmas. They all went really well, yet all were very different even though the basic pattern was the same! I'm always watching and analysing, partly to improve what I offer but also to understand the continuous change of people's thinking and ways of living in our society. Here are a few observations.

The picture at the top of the next column is an example of the point in the service where everyone brought the sheep they had made and laid it in front of the manger. Quite a flock in this picture. With the sheep in place we paused to wonder at the birth of Jesus. Emmanuel, God with us. It never ceases to surprise me that when an opportunity to pause and be still is offered, everyone, regardless of age, takes that opportunity. We need more of these pauses in services and in life.

Consumerism is a big driver in today's society. Church is often seen as just another product to be consumed and the approach of many attending is 'What's in it for me?' Perhaps a new version of *veni, vidi, vici* might be, ***I came, I consumed, and I left!***

In one church it was striking how the parents / carers literally sat to one side expecting others to support their children in the activities and whenever there was a call to 'come together' they ignored it and continued with their conversations. Is that rude or just the way that people are today? It may jar with those of you who expect a certain type of behaviour in church and consider reverence and stillness as stayed quietness. A challenge to us all.

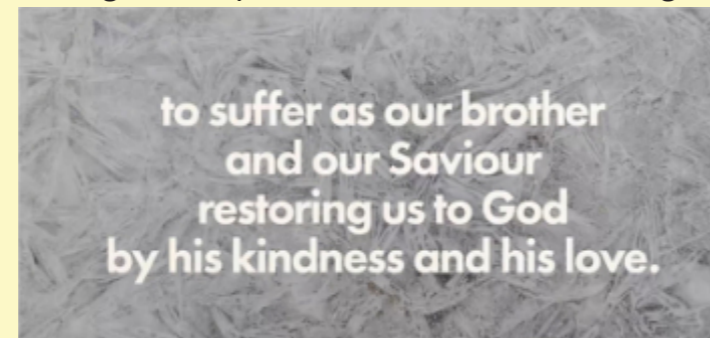
The style of these services is designed to be accessible to everyone and it's very gratifying to have children and adults with additional needs, physical, mental and behavioural attending and taking a full part. It's great to see teenagers jesting with their parents. Fabulous to see individual men and women well into their 80's chatting with others around the tables a fraction of their age and having a go with the activities. I've been told that many take their items home and display them. They are a reminder of what they have done but also a prompt for any challenge that has been offered.



In any reading of the gospel accounts you will find Jesus in the crowd, Jesus in the mess and Jesus in the moment. I can see glimpses of all this in action in these services.

A more irreligious view might be that it looks like I'm trying to heard cats most of the time! 🙄

I am continually on the lookout for new songs to sing and to listen to during our acts of worship. I stumbled across one that had a slight 'Western' (as in the Lone Ranger) feel to the melody and it was easy to pick up and sing. I'm aware that we can often sing a lot of sentimental drivel at this time of year and so good words count for a lot when I'm looking at songs. This is part of a the verses that we sang.



Gone are the days when we can assume that everyone knows what we consider to be a traditional carol. Gone are the days when people sing in corporate worship so my invitation is always to join in or simply listen. Have you kept pace with society and how it functions or retreated to your safe space in your church?

# Fact

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## Epiphany: fluff or grit?

Epiphany is the season of remembering the arrival of the Wisemen from the East who visit Jesus a couple of years after his birth. This account is only found in Matthew's Gospel and I suspect we have lost the impact of the original story on the original audience.

Matthew the disciple was a Jew and his primary audience of his Gospel are Jews. Let's be honest if we were to start to read this Gospel we would skip most of chapter one as it's a tedious list of names, yet this was Matthew setting out to his readers that Jesus was a true Israelite and the promised Messiah. As we start chapter two we find the Epiphany saga. Today we focus on the travellers and what their names might have been, how many there were and apportion meaning to the gifts they brought. As we do that we miss the slap around the face and total affront the original readers would have felt hearing the idea that gentiles would recognise the Messiah before the Jews, that God would engage in Astrology to call these travellers to worship him before those of status. Herod depicts Jewish authority that is Godless, self-centred, merciless and wicked and that God steps in to protect these Gentiles on their journey home. The Jews of the day had missed who Jesus was and that is a theme that is repeated throughout all the Gospels.

2000 years later we can smugly sit in our comfy chairs and sneer at those first listeners of this story who appear to have missed the point. However, there is much that we could learn from this story if we dare to identify with them as opposed to look down upon them.



In my experience, at the back end of the last century many a preacher would often pose the question, 'If Jesus were to come back today would He be found in our churches or in the places of pain and despair in the world around us?' It was intended to be a rallying call to mission within our communities. Sadly, I think it became one of those moments when everyone thought the preacher was talking to the person next to them!

The coming of the Magi and giving gifts is a nice fluffy, warm story but the gritty reality is to acknowledge that God will find ways to reveal Himself to those who are searching for Him. In a world where the church is less and less relevant, less and less visited, less and less understood or valued how will people find God? Perhaps God will do what He's always done, He'll find other ways to reveal Himself to those who are searching for Him. That might well be an affront to some of my readers but I see it as a challenge to me and the ministry of FACT. To seek out ways that are accessible and open to the many who today have no knowledge of the God we love and serve but who are searching for the something that is beyond them and totally other. That something or someone who will make sense of life and bring meaning to their existence.

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## Toddlers

“Did you see those 2 children sat over there”, said the deputy manager pointing out 2 children in the group.

“No, sorry I didn’t, they were all sat so beautifully and were a credit to you”, I replied.

“No, you don’t get it, do you, those 2 children never sit still for anyone or anything yet they were transfixed on you and all you did. The story, the song and especially the puppet. We’re so excited to see that reaction from them!”.

This was part of the conversation following a visit in November to one toddler group. Sometimes I just do my thing and forget that after nearly 30 years I’m pretty good at it. It’s a joy and a pleasure to be offering something about God, and I hope, of God to these young lives and the volunteers/staff that support them. One helper commented that they remember me coming to a toddler group she attended when her children were young and how much she enjoyed it and valued it. She spoilt it by telling me that her son was now nearly 15!

As you read this I’ll have visited 5 groups with another 3 in the very near future. A simple theme of ‘Helping Hands’ unpacked by telling the story of Jesus healing Blind Bartimaeus using a big picture book and a soft toy with a blindfold plus a song that they can get involved in and finishing with one of my puppet friends is all on the menu for this half term.



Next Half Term, it will come as no surprise to you that I will be telling the Easter story, focusing on all the people who realised that ‘Jesus is alive’.

More on that in the next newsletter. Don’t forget there’s room for other groups. 😊

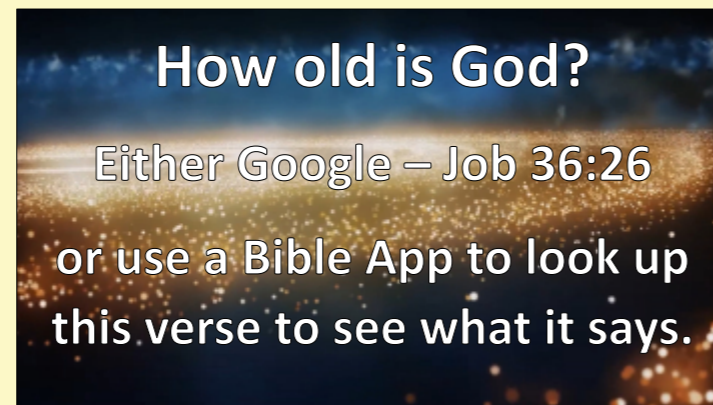
I just need an invite.

## Time2Worship Together

January has seen a different approach to the Intergenerational Worship. Rather than a Bible story being the theme we gently unpacked a simple yet profound question, **How Big is God?**

We considered this little fellow, ‘Flatty’.

A 2 dimensional creature who lives in a 2D world. We, as 3D creatures in a 3D world, would be far beyond it’s ability to comprehend who or what we are, yet may be aware that we are real and exist. This proved to be a useful way of considering God who is far beyond our comprehension and multi-dimensional. We looked at texts from the book of Job to see Job wrestling with this huge question.



There were other spin off questions, such as this one above, that we discussed while doing some simple craft around the tables.

Once we recognised that God was simply beyond us, then believing in the inexplicable was only a matter of faith in what we couldn’t yet image and faith was the logical step forward.



## Trustees

In the autumn I wrote about a possible new Trustee. They were interested and loved finding out about us. They attended a meeting to meet the other Trustees but while we were pursuing this gentle path of discovery, they informed us that they were also considering other advances for voluntary positions in churches and on school governing bodies. Good people are always in demand. Although they loved us and could see that the role of Trustee wasn’t one that was onerous, they eventually declined and took up the other positions. Their gain was our loss.

So, we now have a board of four Trustees with one of them standing down in October, having completed a 10 year stint.

I wonder if you could pause as you read this and think about family, friends, contacts or others who come into your circle of life who you could chat to about our need for Trustees.

Did anyone come to mind? Will you make a concerted effort to tell them about our need and start the ball rolling? Will you pray for this specific issue?



This project is one that has been a slow burner and had a number of false starts over the years. It’s a good idea and has been well produced but never quite taken off as we would have hoped. We are still keen to explore the possibility of creating an app instead of the physical boxes of **Time to Share at Home**. To that end we are currently chatting with a graphic artist and a web/app designer. It’s still very early days but we are hopeful. Part of that process will be to increase the professional look of what we have currently in the boxes and using those developments within the app.

Do get in touch if you are interested in knowing more about the app or if you know of someone who might be interested in aiding us in its development.

## Feb & Mar Services

In the next two months we will firstly think about the saying of Jesus in Luke 9:61-62 as we enter Lent and use this craft to help our encounter with what God might have to say to each of us.



Then in March we will take the theme of ‘Shepherd and sheep’ in the run up to Easter. We will delve into Psalm 23 and John 10.



If you have never been and experienced a service, why not come and join in and benefit from the opportunities to encounter God in a new way?

### Diary Dates

31 <sup>st</sup> Jan	Footprints Toddlers
1 <sup>st</sup> Feb	Little Tots Toddlers
5 <sup>th</sup> Feb	Staines Methodist meeting
9 <sup>th</sup> Feb	Playtime Toddlers
11 <sup>th</sup> Feb	St Nicholas 3pm
12 <sup>th</sup> - 16 <sup>th</sup>	Half Term break
18 <sup>th</sup> Feb	St Peters 10.30am
7 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Seedlings Toddlers
8 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Playtime Toddlers
10 <sup>th</sup> Mar	St Nicholas 3pm
11 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Laleham Church Playgroup
12 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Tiddlers Toddlers
13 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Little Fishes Toddlers
14 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Little Tots Toddlers
15 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Minnows Toddlers
17 <sup>th</sup> Mar	St Peters 10.30am
29 <sup>th</sup> Mar	Good Friday
31 <sup>st</sup> Mar	Easter Sunday

Jesus said to him,

‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

Luke 9:62