



- Overend Advent gifts
- Lye Advent Keep Calm Bags
- Providence Samaritan's Purse shoe boxes



- Remembrance Prayer Stations at Birch Coppice
- Advent Children and Families activity bags
- Zoom smiles from some of the team!

Advent 2020 Letter to the Vale of Stour Churches



Greetings in the name of Christ.

It seems that, this autumn, the whole world is waiting, sadly not for Jesus but for a vaccine - an alternative saviour - that may bring a return to normal in the new year. Of course we give thanks for the work of God through scientists and doctors and we pray that these vaccines, developed so quickly, will be safe in the long term and will indeed offer protection against COVID-19.

What's interesting is that I noticed myself dwelling on the word 'normal'. What is normal? And do we want to go back to all aspects of it? Our normal before Covid included marginalisation of refugees, many damaged and broken global relationships, increasing gaps between rich and poor, climate crisis made worse by denial and a lack of appreciation of those in the care sector to name but a few...

Certainly we look forward to being able to gather as family, church and community without masks and in closer proximity.

But I wonder if we are brave enough to hold onto some of the good things that have emerged from our Covid journey. I have witnessed churches working so creatively to ensure that the isolated and the vulnerable are not forgotten. I have rejoiced in seeing increased community spirit. There is a fresh appreciation of care workers and the NHS. We have discovered some of the gifts and opportunities of online communication and some, perhaps, have had chance to reflect on their priorities in life. It has also been wonderful to see the creativity of so many as faith and comforting words have been shared in cards and candles, liturgy, blogs, online worship, videos and activity bags.

Yes there has been huge loss, much grief and there will be hurdles to overcome as we face the fallout of this year. But all is not darkness as we hear again the words of Isaiah recalled in Luke:

Luke 3:4–6 (NRSV) - *as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight... crooked paths shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

In those days, when a king travelled the desert, workers preceded him to clear debris and smooth out the roads to make the trip easier. I wonder what Luke means using this quote here? Is it that through John, and in this generation, through our lives and witness that the hearts and minds of those around us may be 'made ready' to receive the story and message of Jesus?

As we approach a unique Advent, in partial or complete lockdown, as we continue to face the inner and outer turmoil of what will be an entire year of crisis, I cling onto the discipline of waiting with expectation that Christ's coming is in fact the key and the cure to this world's darkness much of which existed before Covid.

And I wonder how I might prepare the way, smooth the path and straighten the route to enable myself and others to experience the presence, comfort, hope and light of God-in-Christ this Christmas.

May God bless you and keep safe – Rev Alan Combes

A prayer

Come and sit beside me while I pray, Lord.

I need to feel as though you are close enough to hear.

Lately, you've seemed distant and far away.

*But now I pause, and at last realise
that you have been there all the while.*

*Throughout all my distractions, you have been with me,
patiently waiting for my focus to return to you.*

*You invite me to come and sit beside you, not because I am worthy,
but because I am in need.*

*Now I am still and in the peace that enfolds me,
may I know that you are God. Amen*

Lyn Gennoe - Local Preacher, Bromsgrove and Redditch

Saltmine Theatre Company Opportunity – CHURCHES ACT NOW

This amazing, local but internationally renowned Christian group needs our help. This Christmas they have boldly created a great Christmas video called 'Hark'. Churches can purchase 'Hark Bags' for £5 each from Adrian Lowe (leader of Love Dudley) that contain a card with an access code to watch this tremendous play online. You can add your own gifts / literature and then give them away to friends and neighbours.

I know some of you have done gift bags already but it not too late for other churches to ask people to consider buying 2-3 bags for their neighbours – gather up an order and contact Adrian.

Other Circuit News

- In a joint project with Dudley and Netherton circuit our Children and Families team have created Activity Advent bags for under 8s and over 8s. A big logistical task well done!
- Exploratory work continues in the potential future partnership between the circuit and the wonderful Brierley Hill Project – a local Christian charity who support people in need of support, counselling and food.
- We are delighted to announce that four micro-grants were applied for and awarded recently through the district 'God with us' fund. In fact the district limited this to three per circuit so we funded the last one! These included:
 - Kingswinford Feed My Sheep - money towards providing a remote Christmas day afternoon tea pack.
 - Children's and Families - funds to support the Advent Activity Bags project (above)
 - Overend - funds to support their Candle Gift Advent project
 - Birch Coppice - gifts to say thanks to local teachers.

Churches Open for Private Prayer

- Birch Coppice from Sunday Dec 6th 10am-2pm
- Kingswinford – Wednesdays 3pm-5pm

Good News Paper (January Edition): please pass any contributions / stories of God at work to Rev Josephine. Thank you.

Circuit wide on-line Christingle Service on Sunday 13th December – 6.30pm in VoSWorship, our online Church. **Spread the word...**