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**StAG’s NEWSLETTER**

**January/February 2024**

Dear All,

**The parts of the Christmas story we don’t read…**

Let me begin by wishing you every blessing this Christmas. For the time we might spend with family and friends; for the greetings and presents we might exchange; for the time of rest we might enjoy; and for the time reminding ourselves of key aspects of our faith.

Mark’s Gospel does not begin with an account of Jesus’ birth – it begins a quote from the prophet Isaiah (chapter 40 verse 3) about the coming of the Messiah, whom we come to learn is Jesus.

The opening words of John’s Gospel speak about the creation of all things through the Word, an echo of Genesis (chapter 1) and God speaking the world into existence. In John chapter 1 verse 14, we read that Jesus is this Word, He “becameflesh and lived among us”. God with skin on!

During Advent and at Christmas, our Bible readings usually come from the Gospel of Luke (chapters 1 and 2): we have Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story and the birth of John (the Baptist) in their old age; we have the Angel Gabriel, the journey to Bethlehem, the full-up inn and the shepherds.

Matthew’s Gospel, beginning in chapter 1 verse 18, contains the parts about Joseph and the awkward situation surrounding Mary’s pregnancy, the Star, Herod the Wise-Men and their gifts.

Hang on a moment… what about the opening 17 verses of Matthew’s Gospel? Why do we seem to ignore them. Before you keep reading, maybe go and open a Bible at Matthew chapter 1 verse 1.

A long list of names! “Abraham was the father of Isaac…” all the way through to “…Joseph the husband of Mary”. Forty-two generations. If you read carefully, you will spot that amongst the names of many men, four women are mentioned.

Matthew 1 verse 6 – “David the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah” – a tragic story found in 2 Samuel chapter 11 - in which the “great” King David abuses his power over another man’s wife and gets her pregnant, and David conspires to have her husband killed.

Matthew 1 verse 5 – “Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth” – the Old Testament book called “Ruth” has the full story. The moving story of a ‘foreign’ widow called Ruth who sticks with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi. Together, they find a way to survive in keeping with the traditions of their time.

Mathew 1 verse 5 – “Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab” – we can read this account in Joshua chapter 2. A difficult story set in the ancient city of Jericho. Rahab is a prostitute; she strikes a deal to keep her family safe when the itinerant nation of Israel crosses over the Jordan river into the land. Here, we find ancient roots of the conflict we are seeing daily in the news.

Matthew 1 verse 3 – “Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar”. This is a shocking account (Genesis 38) of a woman who resorts to extreme measures to get justice according the customs of her time.

When the writer of Matthew’s Gospel wrote this genealogy and deliberately included these four women, they are more than just names: they carry with them their stories, all of which are shocking. We almost certainly would not include them in our carol services. If such things were to have happened in our families, we would probably prefer not to mention them.

The hardest part of this message to write was the first paragraph. While I sincerely do wish everyone all the best for Christmas, for many of us, it is a difficult time of year. Many people’s mental health suffers; loneliness can be amplified; some people overstretch financially to try to provide a ‘perfect’ Christmas.

Sadly, for many, their experience of the Bible ends as children with the Christmas Nativity, a sanitised version which they seem as having little relevance for their adult lives. In these four women’s stories, we read of very difficult times they endured. I think that the writer of Matthew deliberately included these four women’s stories, so that we might appreciate that Jesus is truly human, one of us. They also remind us Christians that God is involved in every life, no matter how ‘messy’ it might seem!

*Revd. Walt Johnson ... Minister in the Bolton & Salford Missional Partnership*



As most of you will know, we received the Eco Church SILVER AWARD on 19th November.

You may like to know some of the detail which was included in our application for the award.

* The replacement of all accessible light fittings in the church buildings with low-energy equivalents.
* Sunday services which included teaching and preaching on environmentally friendly themes.
* Maintaining regular use of fairly traded food products, and environmentally friendly paper, hand towels and cleaning products.
* Banning future use of Floral Foam (the green stuff!)
* To make up for the fact that the church has no land around it, purchasing olive trees in Palestine.
* Some members involving themselves in community litter picking, encouraging travel to church with car sharing, and reviewing their own lifestyle choices.
* Supporting the URC Commitment for Life campaign

Thanks to everyone who helped us reach this point. We now start to work for the GOLD award. Watch this space! Jim Hollyman.

PREACHERS BOOKED FOR 2024

7-1-24 Mr Leo Roberts

14-1 “Preaching with a view”

21-1 Rev Walt Johnson

28-1 Rev Tony Burnham

4-2 Rev Peter Wightman

11-2 Rev Jim Hollyman

18-2 Mr Peter Holland

25-2 Rev Walt Johnson

3-3 Mrs Gill Dascombe

***Family News***

*Two of our members have died recently, both in their 90s. Roy Brooks died in Epworth Grange Nursing Home, Bury, and Vera Edge in Beechville, Bolton. They were both well loved and respected members of our church! Our thoughts are with their families and we hold them all in our prayers.*

**Commitment for Life**

We have received grateful thanks from the URC office in London for our donation of £2320 to Commitment for Life. The letter included this short message from Patrick Walker, Chief Executive Officer for Christian Aid:*“Thank you so much for all of your dedicated support for Commitment for Life. Ongoing partnerships like Commitment for Life deepen our relationships with those across the world and challenge us to keep justice and peace at the centre of our Christian life. Together we are part of the transformation of God’s kingdom and seeing change can happen.”* Jill Hollyman

***SHALOM***