**StAG’s NEWSLETTER**

**March/April 2024**

Dear All,

As we are now well into Lent, I suppose this letter could start with Easter greetings! The weather recently has given us some surprisingly high temperatures (ignoring the wetness!!) and as my local seasonal guide (Higher Bradshaw) is already showing its ‘daffodil delight’, along with hedges full of catkins, then Spring must be arriving at least a week early! **Happy Easter to all!**

Jill E says Clare Downing is wanting to meet some of the congregation before she takes our Easter Day service. There will be a meeting on 18th March at 2pm in church. If any of you would like to take part please let her know. It will be the first few who reply who will be able to attend.

**Journeying through Lent…**

At some point, we have all probably had the experience of taking a familiar journey (like going to/from school, work, the supermarket etc.) only to arrive at our destination and not be able to remember anything about the journey. Nothing new or unusual happened. Or maybe we were thinking about other things, or our attention was distracted by a conversation or the radio.

Lent can be a bit like that! As we journey through Lent (again), and we re‑read the Gospel accounts, we may find that we do not notice anything new, or we feel that we are so familiar with them that the concerns of the present moment overwhelm our appreciation of the events of Holy Week. All four Gospels recount the events, each in its own way. Our recollection and understanding are likely to be a merging-together (or synthesis) of these.

At the start of the final week of Jesus’ life on earth, He took a journey – on a colt/donkey - which took him from Bethany (near the Mount of Olives) into Jerusalem, accompanied by a crowd.

Please open your Bible at Mark, chapter 11, and read through verses 1 to 11.

Seven of the eleven verses in this reading are about the colt/donkey.

We tend to read Jesus’ knowledge of the donkey as divine foresight. It could have been a prior undocumented arrangement Jesus made with the owner. In Mark, it is bystanders who challenge the disciples about taking the donkey – the mention of Jesus’ words is sufficient to allay their concerns.

The donkey is tied up in the street, so he/she is probably familiar with the human noise and bustle. (I am deliberately writing “he/she” as a reminder that we are discussing a living, feeling animal, part of God’s creation, who is more than the fulfilment of a prophecy about Jesus.)

Maybe the donkey was used to carrying things on his/her back, but today was a new experience: someone got on his/her back and rode! Did the donkey try to shake Jesus off? Or readily go where Jesus led?

The journey from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem is about 3km on hilly terrain, probably quite a strain for a young donkey carrying a human for the first time.

The donkey was used to walking on stony ground. Today, there were cloaks and leafy branches. Did the donkey want to pause for a snack? Did he/she pee or poop on those cloaks, no doubt to much annoyance from the cloaks’ owners? Was he/she frightened by the shouting, wanting to run away?

And once Jesus had reached the Temple, who took the donkey back home – as promised?

And a thought about those shouting “hosanna” – we tend to assume that they were the very same people who five days later were shouting “crucify”. Every crowd comprises individuals, each made in the image of God in all diversity, each with their own thoughts and feelings.

A prayer as we journey together through Lent towards Good Friday and onwards to Easter Sunday.

Creator God,
as we read through familiar passages,
inspire us afresh through Your Spirit,
that we might always encounter You in new ways.
Open our eyes and minds and hearts
to behold Your love for us in creation –
the plants, the animals and each individual. Amen.

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

**TH F C dates**

March 7th Victoria Hall ‘The Hive’ – Speakers

 21stBlackburn Cathedral–Tapestries OR Jill Hollyman

April 4th Return from Grange-over-Sands

April 18th The Barlow Institute, Edgworth

May 2nd “Blossom Walk” OR Bridgewater Gardens TBA

**Preachers**

Mar 3rd    Mrs Gill Dascombe
Mar 10th  Revd Tony Burnham
Mar 17th    Revd Walt Johnson
Mar 24th    Mr George Grime
Mar 29th  Good Friday Service at Victoria Hall - led by Revd Walt Johnson
Mar 31st    Easter Sunday led by Revd Clare Downing
Apr 7th     Revd Walt Johnson - at St AG's with friends from Victoria Hall
Apr 28th    Revd Jim Hollyman

May 5th    Mr Derek Estill

Urban Outreach thanks us for our donation towards 'Christmas Dinner on
Jesus 2023'. This year they blessed 6,777 people with 2,040 hampers.

*Diary dates* Bible studies – Walt said he was holding bible study groups for the Partnership at Bank Top URC on 27th February, 12th & 26th March, on the theme of ‘Looking upwards, outwards, and inwards’.

The Victoria Hall, concerts - after a very successful concert last month, the V.H. has sent the following invitation to future concerts

 Saturday 2nd March with the Tootie Flootie quartet.

Saturday 27th April with Bolton Music Service

 Tickets available from our box office or via our website at <https://www.victoriahallbolton.co.uk/concerts-and-events>

**Olive Trees in Palestine**

You may have wondered how the olive trees we bought last year to be planted in Palestine are doing.

The Hamas-Israel war has led to severe movement restrictions in the West Bank and a significant Increase in violence. Closed checkpoints and roadblocks have meant that many farmers and workers have not been able to get to their olive groves.

Many olive groves were cut down and burnt. Those farmers who did manage to harvest some of their crop faced further difficulties and violence in transporting it for processing.

Embrace, through whom we bought the olive trees, had to cancel the annual olive harvesting trip which would have taken UK volunteers out to help with the harvest.

But Embrace was able to fund a new project to pay for local workers to be trained and employed to pick and sort olives from the Al-Makhrour Valley in Bethlehem.

We don’t know whether the trees we bought have survived. But every effort is being made to try to ensure as many as possible trees continue to grow and produce fruit.

We must continue to offer our support in prayer and any other action that may become possible. Jim Hollyman.

Shalom and Easter Blessings to all!