

The Travelling Crib: Room in our homes.....

The picture on the cover of this edition is very traditional – Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus, with the donkey of course! They are the central figures in our travelling crib which is, as you read this, travelling around homes in the parish and, in a few cases, beyond. A travelling crib isn't a new idea: many churches around the world have one. It is a lovely, unique way to help families prepare for Christmas. The crib is blessed in church on Advent Sunday and then is taken home by a family who plays host to the nativity characters for the night, reading the Christmas story together. The next day they pass on the crib to another family, saying prayers together as it is handed over.

As well as the central story of the nativity, there are other stories to a travelling crib. The figures of St Mary's crib have been knitted by a number of local ladies (we couldn't find any men willing to knit!) following a central pattern; each figure was made with love and skill which makes them very special and full of character!

When we needed a temporary home for them Geoff Mills came to the rescue with his carpentry skills and imaginatively put together a mobile stable.

Lynda Potter has master-minded all this, sourcing patterns, people and host families – she too has stories to tell! Thank-you Lynda, for bringing it all together; it would not have happened without you.





Through this travelling crib, the Christmas story is becoming real to us; we've had to think about how to make it happen; it's involved pooling our resources to use the many skills we have around us. I can at this stage only guess what might happen in the homes the nativity will visit. Some families weren't too sure when we approached them, others couldn't wait to be put on the rota!

What will it be like to make room in our homes for these special guests for the night? To stop what we're doing and take time to read with our children the story of a Jesus' birth? It will be an opportunity too for families to get to know each other a little better as they receive and then deliver on the crib.

The last family will bring the crib back to us on Christmas Eve when we shall gather for our family Crib Service.

So, an immense thank you to our knitters: Pam Salter, Eve Bowring, Joyce Knight, Josie Thomas, Janet Burbridge, Margaret Walker, and of course, Lynda Potter.

Drawing people together through making something happen, through showing hospitality, and making time to think of how we want to respond to God who comes to us through the life of Jesus. In such simple, inexpensive ways, these can be the stories of our lives as we get ready for Christmas, caught up in Jesus' life whose birth long ago we shall soon celebrate once again. May we be renewed in our hope and catch a fresh vision for God's world.

With love and prayers for a peaceful and hopeful Christmas.

Sally

Children's Special— Escape to Egypt!

This is the theme of the Christmas frieze which will be hung in St Mary's church on the wall beside the Allen organ. Work on the frieze began in earnest by the 38 children who attended the Children's Special on 23 November. It will be finished by children from junior church over the next few Sundays and put in place just before Christmas Eve.

The 'Special' began by teaching the children some Egyptian dance moves, accompanied by music not usually heard in the church! They then dispersed into 3 groups and went off to different activities by rotation. Pat's group created a glorious din as they learned to sing 'Little Donkey' with all kinds of wonderful instruments. When all 3 groups came together later, the singing and accompaniment was quite transformed!

Sally's group imagined what the long and arduous journey from Bethlehem, to Jerusalem and then fleeing to Egypt might have been like for Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus. The church pews 'turned into' shelter from the cold in the desert night; the font provided fresh water as if from a well in the soaring temperatures at midday. Sand hills, the Red Sea and other obstacles had to be negotiated before we arrived, as refugees, to make a new, albeit temporary, home in Egypt (well, St Catherine's Chapel!).





St Michael's room, under the direction of Robin and Chris, was the hub for the seriously enjoyable work of 'blow painting' star and pebble sticking, drawing of feet and faces, hieroglyphics and more. It was thirsty work so half-way, we all had to stop to refuel!

The session was brought to a close with a short service by the East window in church, decorated with fairy lights, beginning with the Egyptian dance, singing Little Donkey, a prayer and a blessing. All the children played their parts beautifully, watched by their families.

It was a real team effort – thanks to the tremendous planning and organisation executed by Robin, Chris, Karen, Pat and a great band of helpers.

Thank you to everyone. Half an hour after the children had gone, there wasn't a sign of the tent, the fairy lights and the distinctive Egyptian music was but a memory. All that remained was a whiff of frankincense, and lots of paintings flapping gently on the line in St Michael's Room. The rest had escaped.....

How do Signs of Christ-mass Speak to us now?

Revd Mary Robins reflects

Christ's mass is celebrated just after the winter solstice when the nights are longest. The Old Religion celebrated the light by feasting on fruits and nuts saved from the autumn so as to encourage the light to return and keep the thought of light in people's hearts. The early Christian missionaries used that same symbolism, but said the light is Christ and we celebrate his birth now so that we may all know the light Christ brings into the world. We know this life as we follow teachings of Jesus through the rest of the year. We learn again and again of his teaching of peace, hope, joy, mercy and of death and resurrection.

Mary, supported by Joseph, let Christ's conception and birth happen through her. She is our example of gestating that which is of God in our lives so that we birth something new that is of God. We are small creators with the Creator.



The shepherds were ordinary folk and the first called to meet Jesus Christ. They recovered from the shock of seeing and hearing angels and risked leaving their sheep to go from the hillside to the village. We live in dark times when we may be surprised by light and singing voices as we are called to take risks

The babe was born in poverty on an enforced journey to register for the occupying enemy power. The inn keeper had little to offer, but he gave what he had. There are so many refugees in the world; can we find ways to be more generous in sharing with them and finding where our voices can speak for justice?



Wise strangers came from the east with gifts to honour the babe. They followed the star, their leading light. We have the light of Christ to guide our earthly journeys. We can also learn there are wise people who come from places we find strange Would we receive their gifts or tell them to go away?

Murderous King Herod killed all first born sons in his attempt to remove the new King that he thought threatened his throne. He did not succeed in killing Jesus because Mary and Joseph had taken Jesus away. Herod did not understand that the Kingship of Jesus Christ is not the same as an earthly kingship. So much violence happens because people feel threatened and react to defend themselves. When we Practise the Presence of God, we know steady trust and confidence in our Creator and do not lash out, driven by fear.

At this festive season when we retell the Christmas story, may our lives be renewed . May our souls be well fed, as well as our bodies. As Rabbi Lionel Blue said on 'Thought for the Day', 'Don't loose your souls as well as your savings', and went on, ' Give your losses to God so your bitterness won't poison you, and be generous with what you have got.'



I pray us all a very well Blessed Christmas and New Year.

A Christmas Prayer

Loving Father, help us to remember the birth
of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and the worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate and
open the door of love all over the world.

Let kindness come with every gift and
good desires with every greeting.

Deliver us from evil by the blessing
which Christ brings, and teach us to
be merry with clear hearts.

May the Christmas morning make us happy
to be Thy children, and the Christmas evening
bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake. Amen!

Robert Louis Stevenson

Your editor writes..

November was indeed another busy month. The month started sombre with All Souls and Remembrance Sundays and then I was caught up in my confirmation ceremony, which you can read all about on pages 14 to 17. Work did not slow down any and I drove on at a rate of knots grateful to still be busy when colleagues were already discussing the decline in business as a result of the credit crunch.

It should not then have shocked me when I was hit for six with the virus that has been doing the rounds. After a very unpleasant few hours in the bathroom I slept for 36! Losing a day is a very strange feeling. I kept getting my days mixed up and turning up for appointments either a day late or a day early! Fortunately my trusty secretary was on hand to pick up the pieces.

Unfortunately, she is not around to manage my personal life as well, and consequently you may have noticed that I am late getting out the edition this month. I do apologise. I really had not felt up to putting the magazine together but I have had such lovely feedback from so many of you readers that I could not let you down.

I also want to say a big thank you to all of you that have indeed stood by me this year. It is with genuine surprise that I have realised that come February edition I will have done a whole year! This would not have been possible without your continued support in sending through interesting and topical stuff to print and Sally's continued encouragement and contributions.

Can I make an early Christmas wish and ask that you keep it coming next year? I would be lying if I said it is not a chore each month bashing out the magazine, but I would also have to admit that it is one I have come to enjoy thanks to your input. Having feedback is great and your collective contributions certainly lighten the load!

My I also take this opportunity to wish you all a wonderful Christmas. I am looking forward to celebrating the birth of Christ and joining in the thanksgiving at this amazing time in our Christian calendar, but I am also taking some time out to be with family and friends, eating, drinking and being quite merry ... I can't wait!

Tracy x

Your editor's Christmas Prayer

"We have all read what happened between the opposing armies, and how it came unexpected, undersigned, and yet willed with all the unconscious force of their sudden natures.

Not once or twice but again and again we hear of this sudden change upon the night of Christmas Eve, how there was singing upon one side answered by the other, and how men rose and advanced to meet each other as if they had been released from a spell.

Everyone who tells of it speaks also of his own wonder as if he has seen a miracle; and some say that the darkness became strange and beautiful with lights as well as music, as if the armies had been gathered together there not for war but for the Christmas feast"

A. Clutton-Brock, 'The Times', quoted in A Christmas Book 1928.

This piece was written in response to what by many was considered a miracle. In 1914, on Christmas Eve, German and British soldiers walked across No Mans Land and exchanged greetings in an unprompted ceasefire that embraced goodwill and fellowship to all men. It was for many the last glimpse of an Old Europe before the slaughter that changed the face of the world. It is devastating that war and bloodshed persist today. I pray that this Christmas season they desist.

I pray that God's light shines down on those involved in any conflict or fighting anywhere in the world. I pray that people everywhere get the opportunity to embrace God's will and feel the love that comes from belonging to the fellowship that is humanity. I pray that all mankind can one day share in God's love and conflict and fighting become concepts only read about in history books.

I know this is a big ask and I know I do not have the answers but I pray collectively we find them before we destroy all that has been given to us so freely.

I pray you have a safe Christmas.

Parishioners Pages

It is so rewarding to receive your letters and pieces for the magazine and know that you have not only enjoyed reading last month's edition but that you were inspired to contribute something this month.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed this month and through out the last year; I am grateful for all your support in what has been a steep learning curve!

Tracy

A letter ... Anon.

Reading through our excellent magazine from cover to cover, I am reminded, especially now in the current economic crisis, how important it is for us to support our local shops.

In Welham Green and Brookmans Park we are so very fortunate to have excellent shops to hand. In Brookmans Park we are so well supplied that there is hardly any need to go further afield.

Yes, busy working people find 'big shops' at the supermarkets are most convenient but shopping locally whenever possible enriches the community; you met and get to know our friendly and helpful shopkeepers, many of whom advertise in our magazine. They know the needs of their retired and older customers and are willing to deliver; for some the local shops are a life line.

So enjoy your shops, keep our communities busy, save your petrol and remember 'if we don't use them, we'll lose them!'

Bird Song



I heard a bird sing in the dark of December
A magical sound and sweet to remember
You are nearer to Spring than you were in November
When you hear a bird sing in the dark of December

Derek Thomas

The Bible - Treasures Uncovered

I was a welfare officer with the 11th Hussars (Prince Albert's Own) in Germany, part of BAOR after the war.

Every Wednesday in the canteen, the young troopers who were bored and broke would say, "C'mon Chris, tell us a story love", and I would tell them what I had taught the Sunday school that week.

I left out Adam and Eve! - but they were mesmerized by Noah and his ark and saving the animals from the flood, and Samson getting his hair cut, and of course, David and Goliath and many more.

One trooper, was so impressed he said - "Cor, damn good yarns in that Bible - keep telling 'em Chris!"

Chris Willis



'Blessed are those ...'

Lynda Potter found this in St Andrew's Ferring parish magazine.

Blessed are those who can laugh at themselves;
they will have no end of fun.

Blessed are those who can tell a mountain from a molehill;
they will be saved a lot of bother.

Blessed are those who know how to relax without looking for excuses;
they are on the way to becoming wise.

Blessed are those who think before acting and pray before thinking;
they will avoid many blunders.

Above all, blessed are those who recognise the Lord in all whom you meet;
the light of truth shines in your life, for you have found true wisdom.

By Joseph Folliet

Confirmed or not?

I have been attending the current 'Preparing for Confirmation' course held at St Mary's and wanted to communicate my experience to date.

When I considered becoming confirmed I have always asked myself, 'is this the right thing for me?' My uncertainty of undertaking this journey always held me back, but the invitation to this most recent batch of lessons made me decide to go and find out just what it was all about.

My arrival at the first session was with initial thoughts of not knowing quite what to expect and, I am ashamed to admit, whether it was going to be boring!! On the contrary!!

Every session I have attended so far has been superb and I have thoroughly enjoyed our Monday night meetings. I have even found myself leaving each session looking forward to the next!!

Don't get me wrong.....not all my questions have been answered, no leap of faith made and no blinding clarity of light received, just a slow and gradual improvement of my own personal understanding of my Church, its beliefs and its teachings. This might sound boring but I can assure you it's not. It is enjoyable, educational, inspirational and emotional and has enabled me to build sturdier footings on which to build my faith.

Sally and Mary have been great at imparting their knowledge and understanding helping us, as a group, to gain more clarity (if only a little at a time). The group has lively, open and frank discussions on all of the subject areas and everyone respects each others' views. As a direct result of these sessions my understanding has improved as has my enjoyment at Sunday Service.

Whether you want to, are unsure, or are already confirmed I would recommend you try to attend one of these courses, when they are next held as they are great!! I will miss these sessions when they are complete and may well attend another once confirmed or not?

Deborah Stapleton

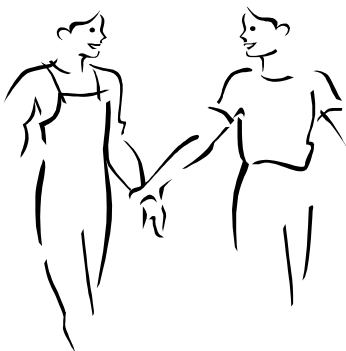
Confirmation Round Up!

I have the luxury of writing this article after my confirmation service so can reflect not only on my journey through 'preparing for confirmation' classes but also on the celebration of confirmation and first communion.

Similarly to Debbie, I was also unsure as to why I was embarking on this journey. When I looked back over my involvement with St Mary's I re-read my first attempt as editor of the magazine. It was only eleven months ago, in the February edition, when I wrote 'It felt a natural progression to continue attending [Church] and whilst I still have unanswered questions over the relevance of the Bible to the 21st Century I cannot find any defect in the moral obligations He asks us to follow. In fact I have found an inner peace and look forward to the opportunity to quietly contemplate my week during the calm of Sunday service.'

I can tell you now that whilst there was some quiet contemplation during confirmation classes there was also some very lively and challenging debates! In the March 2008 edition of the magazine I stated that 'He is always listening, now it is time for me to do the same.' I am not very good at shutting up and letting other people talk; I know my own faults I just can't seem to conquer them. Often in my desire to seek answers I bulldoze everyone else out of the way. I am very grateful to my fellow class mates for their patience! With their insights and often gentle guidance to slow down I was able to find a truth and wisdom behind words that I have often skipped over.

In the February article I also noted with sadness how few 'thirty-somethings' I had met at Church and how I wanted to meet people my own age with similar interests that shared my enthusiasm for being part of the Church. The group of us that met on Monday evenings were not all 'thirty-somethings', some were a bit older and some younger. Nevertheless, I was delighted to discover how well I got on with all of them.

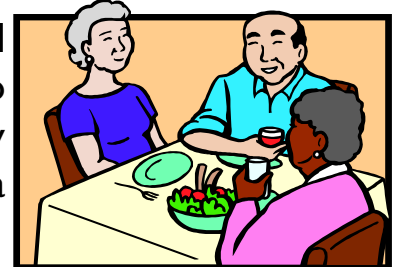


Not only have I now met people with similar interests through my Church but I feel blessed to say I regard them as friends and not just mere acquaintances.

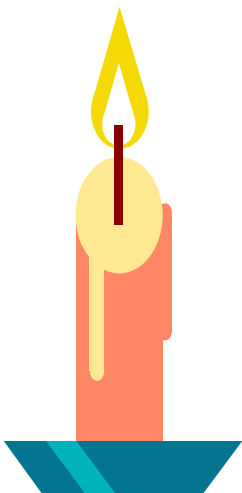
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Friendship blossomed because we were all able to discuss challenging issues, on which we often had differences of opinion, in a trusting and caring environment. We drew strength from each other as we questioned our beliefs and discovered individually and collectively what Jesus meant to us personally.

The men in our group were very much outnumbered by the women however they had their opportunity to take charge! They organized a great Thai take-away and the classes came to an end with us all sharing a meal together.



I was delighted that most of the group took confirmation together. It was very special to stand alongside friends who I felt had been on my journey with me, whilst I made my pledge to Christ.



There was one in our group that did not become confirmed. She said openly to the group that she did not feel ready and I was overwhelmed by her courage. It is never easy to stand alone and speak the truth when your truth is so different to those around you. It was therefore really touching when she joined us at St Michael's in Birchwood to give her support and encouragement. I feel confident that she will also find her peace one day and feel ready to embrace confirmation and I want her to know that I intend to give her the same love and support that she gave me when her time comes.

The service at St Michael's was very special and many of our friends and family attended. The Bishop of Hertford conducted the service and this added even more poignancy for us as the 'family feel' was intensified by having Sally and Chris both watching over us at this special time. It was lovely to see Diana and many of the regular parishioners at St Mary's lending their support. Even up till this point I had not truly realised how pleased people were for us and wanted to join in our celebration. And celebrate we did; we even managed to persuade Sally and Chris to join us in the pub afterwards for a toast!

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Sally made sure that our first communion was just as special, inviting us all up together the following Sunday at the Parish Eucharist. I was brimming with a sense of wellbeing and was surprised at my sense of accomplishment. I cannot explain why I feel this way only that I feel I have achieved something special and significant for myself. I have an inner sense of peace that my relationship with God is truly beginning and I am beginning an exciting journey of discovery, and I am not alone on that journey.

I want to thank Sally and Mary for their guidance during our classes but especially want to thank my classmates. There were many tears, mostly mine, as we explored painful experiences that lead to insightful emotions but also there were many laughs as we shared the joy of each others company and friendship. Debbie was my rock, as always, preventing me from becoming an emotional wreck and to others, you know who you are, thank you for sharing this special time with me. I will always respect you for the opinions you voiced, love you for the patience you showed me and value your gift of friendship. I look forward to our monthly re-unions when we get to share more laughter and no doubt tears!

Do I still have questions over the relevance of the Bible to the 21st Century?

Of course, I did not expect to be able to answer all my questions in eight weeks. My fellow students will certainly vouch that I have far too many for that; that truly would be a miracle! But what I have learnt is that having questions is OK. You should not be afraid to question your faith. It would be vanity to think you have all the answers all of the time. When you are searching for better understanding and when you have the support and guidance of others around you, questioning your faith leads to a deeper knowledge, and God willing, in time, a deeper affirmation.

Tracy Hatswell



Caption Competition

Please send your captions to the office by the February edition deadline. The best (or a selection of the best) will be published in the February edition. Good Luck!

The oldest known Hebrew inscription?

HIRBET QEYAFa, Israel – An Israeli archaeologist has discovered what he believes is the oldest known Hebrew inscription on a 3,000-year-old pottery shard — a find that suggests Biblical accounts of the ancient Israelite kingdom of David could have been based on written texts.

A teenage volunteer discovered the curved shard bearing five lines of faded characters in July in the ruins of an ancient town on a hilltop south of Jerusalem. Yossi Garfinkel, the Israeli archaeologist leading the excavations at Hirbet Qeiyafa, released his conclusions about the writing after months of study. He said the relic is strong evidence that the ancient Israelites were literate and could chronicle events centuries before the Bible was written.



This could suggest that some of the Bible's accounts were based on written records as well as oral traditions — adding credence to arguments that the Biblical account of history is more than myth.

The shard was found near the stairs and stone washtub of an excavated home. It was later discovered to bear characters known as proto-Canaanite, a precursor of the Hebrew alphabet.

The Israelites were not the only ones using the proto-Canaanite characters, and other scholars suggest it is difficult — perhaps impossible — to conclude the text is Hebrew. However, Garfinkel based his identification on a three-letter verb from the inscription meaning "to do," a word he said existed only in Hebrew. "That leads us to believe that this is Hebrew, and that this is the oldest Hebrew inscription that has been found," he said.

Hirbet Qeiyafa sits near the modern Israeli city of Beit Shemesh in the Judean foothills, an area that was once the frontier between the hill-dwelling Israelites and their enemies, the coastal Philistines.

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The site overlooks the Elah Valley, said to be the scene of the slingshot showdown between David and the Philistine giant Goliath, and near the ruins of Goliath's hometown in the Philistine metropolis of Gath.

Carbon-14 analysis of burnt olive pits found in the same layer of the site as the pottery shard helped archaeologists date it to between 1,000 and 975 B.C., the same time as the Biblical golden age of King David's rule in Jerusalem.



Archaeology has turned up only scant finds from David's time in the early 10th century B.C., leading some scholars to argue the Bible's account of the period inflates the importance of him and his kingdom. Some have even suggested his kingdom may not have existed at all. But the fortified settlement where the writing was found contains indications that a powerful Israelite kingdom existed near Jerusalem in David's time, says Garfinkel.

If his claim is borne out, it would bolster the case for the Bible's accuracy by indicating the Israelites could record events as they happened, transmitting the history that was recorded in the Old Testament several hundred years later.

Modern Zionism has traditionally seen archaeology as a way of strengthening the Jewish claim to Israel and regarded David's kingdom as the glorious ancestor of the new Jewish state. As a result, finding evidence of his rule has importance beyond its interest to scholars.



The script, which Garfinkel suggests might be part of a letter, predates the next significant Hebrew inscription by between 100 and 200 years. History's best-known Hebrew texts, the Dead Sea scrolls, were penned on parchment beginning 850 years later.

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The shard is now kept in a university safe while philologists translate it, a task expected to take months. But several words have already been tentatively identified, including "judge," "slave" and "king." The inscription was shown to other scholars at a peer presentation of the findings.

Some scholars are hesitant to embrace Garfinkel's interpretation, and his findings are already being wielded in the ongoing debate over whether the Bible — written hundreds of years after many of its events are supposed to have occurred — is more fact or legend. But the find is certain, at the very least, to prove useful in understanding the development of language and ancient alphabets.

Other prominent Biblical archaeologists warned against jumping to conclusions.

Hebrew University archaeologist Amihai Mazar said the inscription is "very important," but suggested that calling the text Hebrew might be going too far. "The differentiation between the scripts, and between the languages themselves in that period, remains unclear," he said.

If the inscription is Hebrew, it would connect the Hirbet Qeiyafa settlement to the Israelites and make the text "one of the most important texts, without a doubt, in the corpus of Hebrew inscriptions," said Aren Maier, a Bar Ilan University archaeologist.

Next Copy Date

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FRIDAY 23 January 2009 to the Editorial Team:**

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Parishioners Pages Continued

Your New Year Resolution

With regard to Sally's sermon on Bible Sunday, I can recommend the daily readings of the Bible Fellowship could be very helpful. To start the day with one of their readings puts us in a good frame of mind and provides some food for thought.

Our membership includes three publications a year for which the annual subscription is £10.80 for the small print or £14.97 for the large print.

We have ten of our church members who have enjoyed their readings for many years, so if you would like to be included, just let me know and I can increase our order.

This is a good time of the year to think about 2009, so I shall be looking forward to hearing from you.

Pamela Kirk Tel 01707 655349

General:

Enquiries concerning Baptisms, Marriages, Blessings of Civil Marriages and publication of Banns of Marriage should be directed to the Vicar, who should also be contacted for all matters concerning Communion of the Sick and Confessions.

Bodies of all parishioners may be brought into their Parish Church for a Funeral Service, prior to burial or cremation.

Only the current registers, (Baptisms from March 1980; Weddings from January 1999, Burials from March 1984 and Services from July 1996) are stored at the church.

All previous church registers, and parish magazines, are stored at the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, County Hall, Hertford, SG13 8EJ. (01992) 555105, to ensure they are adequately preserved.