Manna mailing – December 2024

Sharing the light of Christ

At Christmas we come together to reflect on the birth of Jesus, who arrived as the Light of the World, bringing hope and peace to all. Across Bath and Wells, church communities will mark this season with joyful gatherings and nativity plays, welcoming everyone to join in celebrating the true meaning of Christmas.

The Revd Ian Rousell, Rector of the Waterside Benefice, can’t wait. He says, “I just love Christmas. This year we’ve been asked to hold a Christmas service for the Scouts which I was delighted to say ‘yes’ to. Who am I to turn down a request to come and celebrate the birth of our Lord – it’s a gift isn’t it!”

The benefice is also holding its first Christmas Tree Festival, at St Peter’s Church, Westfield from 29 November to 1 December. Ian says, “I am really excited about it. It’s the first time we have done it and I thought we may get about 10 or 15 trees, but we’ve had a wonderful reaction from the local community and at the latest count we have 31. We are not quite sure how we are going to fit all the trees and people in the church, but what a lovely problem to have!”

As well as celebrating the joy of Christmas with throughout our diocese, there will also be space for it celebrated in the calm and quiet, in prayer and in moments of reflection. Church communities will also be reaching out to those who may feel lost, lonely or who are struggling, offering compassion and support and sharing the love that Christ brought into the world.

The message of Christ’s birth is one of love and unity, inviting us to carry His light into the new year. As we gather with family and friends, and offer support to our communities, we hold onto the promise that, in Jesus, the world is filled with hope and the reassurance that God’s love is always with us.

News in brief

**The Holy Thorn**

The cutting of the Glastonbury Holy Thorn is a royal tradition that involves sending a sprig of the holy thorn to the monarch for Christmas. It is thought Joseph of Arimathea visited Glastonbury with the Holy Grail. He thrust his staff into Wearyall Hill, which then grew into the original thorn tree. Each year a sprig of it is cut by the eldest child at St John's infant school in Glastonbury. This year it will be sent to King Charles. The tradition is a reminder of the historic ties between the monarchy, Glastonbury, and the church.

**Youth Light Festival**

Bath Abbey was host to an incredible spirit-filled youth festival. Over 150 youth and their leaders from across the diocese joined the Youth Light Festival, an extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime evening of light, inspiration and worship. With everyone arrayed in glow-in-the-dark bracelets, the group enjoyed the [Luxmuralis light show](https://projectionartgallery.com/index.php/about/)  Those gathered also listened to Bishop Michael’s inspiring conversation with Diocesan Youth Voice Lead, Cesca Priestley about ‘what light looks like in the world’, and joined together in worship with music provided by Movement.

**A Grand Organ Experience at Wells Cathedral**

For Brenda Staples from Exmoor, a recent birthday turned into an unforgettable occasion when she was treated to the opportunity to play the Grand Organ at Wells Cathedral. Brenda, who regularly plays the organ for 5 churches in the Exmoor Benefice, was a gift from her children. The much-loved historic organ is in need of major care. The [Wells Grand Organ Appeal](https://www.wellsgrandorganappeal.org.uk/) has been set up to help pay for restoration work. All 5,000 exiting pipes will be removed for repair, cleaning or replacement and the console will be overhauled, along with the pedals and the stops. The organ will then be revoiced and rebalanced.

Bishop’s letter – ‘Jesus, the Light of the World’

‘All is calm, all is bright’ may not be the words that many of us would use to describe our experience of either the run up to Christmas or the feast itself. Presents to buy and wrap, food to order and cook, events and church services to be part of. And that’s before we’ve negotiated the big day itself. I saw one website recently that claimed that Christmas is considered as one of the six most stressful life events, along with divorce, moving house and changing jobs!

In the midst of such chaos, our churches offer an opportunity to find peace during this busy time – of stillness, quiet and the opportunity to stand back from all the pressures that the season contains. This year, the Church of England's theme for Advent and Christmas is Follow the Star: Calm and Bright. The theme draws on some of the lyrics of the famous carol, Silent Night:

“Silent Night! Holy Night!

All is calm, all is bright...”

To be calm and bright is to be invited into the still centre of the Christmas story. It’s to contemplate Mary holding the new-born Jesus, the Light of the World. It’s to open ourselves to the joy of the angels as they tell the shepherds “Do not be afraid - Fear not!” It’s to encounter the wonder of the wise men as they discover that the gift of this child is for the whole world.

May your Christmas 2024 be ‘Calm and Bright’!

**Bishop Michael Beasley**Bishop of Bath and Wells

Interview – Faith and wonder

Each year St Peter’s Church, Portishead is transformed into an interactive experience called the Star Trail which invites visitors to the church and local school children to learn about the Christmas story by following in the footsteps of the three wise men. The Revd Rob Eastwood Dewing is Team Rector at Portishead Team Ministry.

**Q: What happens at Saint Peter’s the week before Advent?**

A: The church is transformed into a series of stations representing the Magi’s journey to Bethlehem. There’s a Bedouin tent, a souk, stations for gold, frankincense, myrrh, one for Saint Nicholas, and the manger, all in a semi-dark, candle-lit space**.**

**Q: Who visits the church during this transformation?**

A: All the local primary schools come. The children get to explore each station and meet characters who are part of the Christmas story. At the souk they meet someone who tells them about the Magi’s journey. Their task then is to follow the star.

**Q: How do the children interact with the Christmas story?**

A: They encounter characters at each station, eventually meeting Mary and an angel in the stable, where they can write a prayer. It brings the Christmas story to life. It helps the children to get a deeper understanding of faith and the meaning of Jesus’ birth.

**Q: Why is this experience meaningful for children?**

A: It introduces a “wow” factor, and a sense that spirituality has a sense of awe. At a time when children are faced with materialism and a consumer-based approach to Christmas this offers a contrasting narrative of wonder and faith. We finish with that sense of God coming and being with us, which is, an extraordinary story.

**Q: Do others in the community participate?**

A: Volunteers come from other churches and none. There are evening sessions. Many children want to come back with their parents creating a shared experience. That’s very special.

**Q: Why is it important to share the Christmas message with children in this way?**

A: For most families, Jesus is not at the heart of Christmas. This reminds them that is where He is. We're offering an alternative a much richer, deeper and more important story than the one that we are sold, which is that Christmas is primarily an opportunity to buy stuff.

**Q: How does the church continue this message beyond Christmas?**

A: At the heart of the Christian faith and the incarnation at Christmas particularly is the sense of God being with, God comes to be with us. We would say that our aim in terms of mission is that we are with, not for, the community, because that’s the model that Jesus gives us in Christ and so the importance of doing this with other people is an offering to the community which is telling the story of the incarnation of God coming to be with.