

Sunday 4 December Scramblers' Christmas Party, 3 pm (£5)
 Monday 5 December Men's Fellowship: Matt Summerfield of Crusaders
 Wednesday 7 December Holy Communion at 11 am, followed by a light lunch
 Friday 9 December Kathryn Harries and Friends Christmas concert in church
 Saturday 10 December Princess Alice Hospice Christmas concert in church
 Saturday 10 December Guildford Cathedral Christmas concert, 7.30 pm (£14)
 Monday 12 December Anchor's Christmas get-together and supper
 Wednesday 14 December Prayer meeting in church, 8 - 9.30 pm

FULL DETAILS OF CHRISTMAS EVENTS AND SERVICES

APPEAR ON PAGES 6 AND 7

Monday 9 January Men's Fellowship: Members' Exchange evening
 Friday 10-12 February Parish Weekend away at High Leigh
 Tuesday 14-17 February Half term Holiday Club for children
 Friday 28 July-7 August 2006 Summer Mission to Ukraine

REGULAR SUNDAY SERVICES

	8 am	10 am	6.30 pm
1st Sunday	Holy Communion (trad)	Morning Praise	Evening Prayer
2nd Sunday	Holy Communion (trad)	Morning Praise	Holy Communion Ord 1
3rd Sunday	Holy Communion (trad)	All Age Service	Evening Prayer
4th Sunday	Holy Communion BCP	Holy Communion Ord 1	Evening Prayer
5th Sunday	Holy Communion (trad)	Morning Praise	Evening Prayer

WEEKDAY SERVICES

Monthly on a Wednesday (see diary above): Holy Communion (Prayer Book)
 2nd and 4th Wednesdays, at 2 pm: Toddlers' Praise (in the Church Hall)
 Every Wednesday, at 7 am: Prayers for 30 minutes (in the Quiet Room)
 Every Thursday, at 3.45 pm: Intercessions (in the Quiet Room)
 Monthly on a Thursday, at 11.45 am at Wingham Court: Holy Communion
 4th Thursday in month, at 11.30 am at the Day Centre: Holy Communion

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December 2005 Free distribution

A VERY HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO YOU
from everyone at Holy Trinity Church Claygate

Peace on earth?

Our Curate writes:

"Please sir, our next lesson is the last lesson before the holidays, so can we have a fun lesson? "

This is the question well known to any teacher. The more cruel teachers would reply, "certainly, and as all my lessons are fun we will be doing algebra on our last lesson." To be fair to these teachers, some of them did not do subjects which lent themselves to fun lessons; after all, once you've done one lesson about gambling with them, there isn't much about statistics that is likely to appeal to a teenager!

The great thing about being a history teacher, I discovered, was that you could always show an episode of Blackadder. On one particular occasion in Blackadder Goes Forth, which is set in the trenches of WW1, Private Baldrick asks whether any of them remember Christmas Day 1914, when both German and British soldiers got out of the trenches and played football. Of course Captain Blackadder's reply is, "remember it? How could I forget it – there was no way I was offside!"

The story of the two sides finding a moment of peace on Christmas day in the midst of terrible conflict is one of my favourite moments in history and captures the sense of a hope for peace that is so often associated with Christmas. *(Continued on page 2)*

VICAR: (Vacancy)

CURATE: THE REVD DAVID KING

LAY ASSISTANT MINISTER: VALERIE BAGLEY

NON-STIPENDIARY MINISTER: THE REVD PROF LINDA MORGAN

COMMUNITY WORKER: STUART WRIGHT

YOUTH WORKER: ASA HUMPHREYS

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(Continued from front page)

And yet peace has it seems faded from view in recent years. The world's problems appear so intractable that we grow tired of hoping that the latest round of negotiations will bear any fruit. Conflict between age-old enemies with centuries-old memories continue. Where is the hope for peace?

What is true internationally is also true personally. Ongoing conflicts between neighbours and family members leave us in turmoil and disillusioned after the latest failed attempt to reach reconciliation. To be honest, when we are personally involved we sometimes stop even wanting peace – or at least the only “peace in our time” we will accept will be “peace on our terms.” Even within us peace is elusive. We seek to know peace within ourselves, but the reality is too often anxiety, fear and self-recrimination.

Christmas seems to offer us some relief from this conflict within and without. The idyllic image of a mother and father gathered around their new born is one that affects many. The sense that at least this family knew peace is a powerful tonic to our own experiences. And yet rather than offering lasting peace, this Christmas card ‘message’ leaves us with a hangover. The brief experience of warmth followed too quickly by the rude awakening of the following morning, for it has no power to change *our* situation – it is too out of touch, too distant. Christmas seems to be nothing more than a quickly taken paracetamol, giving temporary relief, but unable to make any real difference. The game of football nearly a hundred years ago was interrupted by the dull *wumph* of distant artillery fire striking up again.

The reality though is that the peace of which the angel army spoke and sang to the shepherds was not the peace of the scene in the stable, but the peace that the new king would bring. The world at the time of Jesus' birth was anything but peaceful. It was a land under foreign occupation and rule, seething with resentment and discontent, in which people of different race and religion vied with each other for victory. Even those who shared the same religion were pitted against each other for leadership. Even the census was little more than another assertion of Roman authority. So occupation, terrorist uprising, uncertainty, violence and grief – a world all too familiar to us.

God did not wait until he found a brief respite in the conflict and a couple at ease with the world. Rather he chose a Galilean woman, a dislocated political refugee living in a land that was no stranger to violence, and he came to earth as her child. When the angels spoke of peace on earth, they referred not to Christmas as a celebration, but the baby who would grow up to bring peace. Peace between God and humankind and then between humans themselves, by his death on the cross.

So in our conflicts battling with our own lack of peace, God does not offer an immediate end to our struggles, but he does offer us deep inner peace in the midst of our struggles. A peace that comes through the knowledge that He Himself has been there, and most of all through a living relationship with him.

David



From the Parish Registers

We welcome into the family of the Church:

Teddy J Kitch
Finn Jack Kitch
Catherine Jane Maher

(all baptised on 6th November)

We offer sympathy to the relatives and friends of:

Edward Valentine Russell Street
(23rd September)
John Northern
(12th October)
Douglas Henry Clayfield
(21st October)



Life at Holy Trinity

Even a 16-page magazine can do little to reflect all the activities of a church like Holy Trinity. If you'd like to find out a little more, do visit the foyer of the church, open during normal office hours, where you can pick up a welcome brochure and browse among the other displays and material, including our well-stocked bookstall, which has Christmas cards and some fine presents for children.

All contributions for the January issue of Insight should, please, reach the Editor by Wednesday 14th December.

Parish Personalities

Judi Curtis is the subject of this month's Insight Inquisition.

Where were you brought up?

In Old Bexley in Kent.

How long have you lived in Claygate?

For 13 years.

What do you like most about it?

Good local shops, and proximity to London and the countryside.

And if there was one thing you could change?

People who park on the 'no parking' side of the Parade.

Where would you locate your ideal home?

Anywhere on the Dorset coast, ideally Swanage.

What is the least welcome part of your daily round?

All housework.

Which personal trait do you struggle most to overcome?

Putting off doing housework!

What food are you most partial to?

Seafood and chocolate (not together!).

And leave on the side of your plate?

Very little!

What do you watch on television?

Costume dramas, cookery programmes, most sport and Coronation Street!

What would your desert island book be?

A Jane Austen anthology or any autobiography.

What is your favourite music?

70s pop (the music of my youth).

And your favourite hymn?

"Lord, I lift your name on high".

Which passage of the Bible is most telling for you personally?

Colossians chapter 3, verse 16.

Do you have an unfulfilled ambition?

To be a size 12!

The versatility of man's best friend

Members of the Claygate Men's Fellowship and their lady guests had their eyes well and truly opened last month to just how helpful a dog can be. We had recognised the role that guide dogs can play in helping those without sight, but few of us had contemplated dogs helping the disabled by opening or shutting the door of the washing machine and loading and unloading it, retrieving a bank card or receipt from a cash machine, picking goods off supermarket shelves or running upstairs to fetch required items of clothing.

We saw all this happening by video when Malcolm Wells of Canine Partners came to give an entertaining and enlightening talk to an appreciative audience. Canine Partners is a young charity, founded in 1990, and a growing one, with 118 dogs in human partnerships and 30-40 in training.

This role demands a special dog, and of the many labradors, retrievers and poodles (even 'labradoodles') offered to the charity, only a small number were suitable. The training programme is lengthy, since an assistance dog of this kind has to be able to respond to over 100 commands, as well as coping with emergencies and solving problems. But what we came to see was that the psychological benefit that a dog partnership involves is just as important as the practical assistance it brings. People's lives have already been transformed.

We'd love to see you at church

Holy Trinity has been a growing church for many years, which means that new people are coming along all the time. So we are certainly not an exclusive club, but hope to be welcoming to all who join us. We'd like that to include you.

Not 'churchy' enough to get to know God?

If you don't think you would feel comfortable in church, that is no bar to getting to know God. Holy Trinity has the answer.

START has been running for a year now. It is a place where anyone who wants to know God and his love but is not sure about church should go. Come along one Friday night at 8 pm to Church House (the white building behind the church), have a beer or glass of wine and just see if God is there. You can also contact Stu on 07867 888999 for more details.

The Care Team

With God's grace, sharing fellowship with the elderly of our community in their homes is the purpose of the Care Team. We are a group of members of the church ready to listen to the people we visit and to come on a regular basis to remember earlier days, to hear concerns about today, to smile together and maybe pray together.

If you are an elderly person who would like somebody from Holy Trinity to visit you at home, then please contact Valerie Bagley (464243) or Margaret Mathew (462538). If you are a member of Holy Trinity and know of somebody, a neighbour perhaps, who you think might like to be contacted, please do let us know.

Liturgical colours

Although Holy Trinity does not nowadays mark the church seasons with different liturgical colours, we hope our readers may still appreciate what follows.

A lady in the parish once decided to ensure that the Church's ritual colours matched the underclothes she wore.

And so for Christmas, Easter and the Saints' days pure and bright

The priest and congregation knew her lingerie was white.

For all the holy Martyr band whose precious blood was shed, and for the Feast of Pentecost, she took the colour red.

In Advent and in Lent the lady competently strove

To choose the penitential shades of violet, purple, mauve.

Good Friday was a special day and so upon her back

She bore with pride - and some panache - a set of smalls in black.

At other times throughout the year her underwear was seen

To complement the natural world in various shades of green.

At last on Maundy Thursday (your indulgence I entreat)

They stripped the Church of colours - so this line remains discreet!

Besotted by her underwear, the Vicar always knew

The colours of the Church's year - he'd seen them through and through!

They brought a sparkle to his eye, excitement to his life,

But judge him not too harshly, friends, the lady was - his wife!

Ten reasons not to wash

A church minister, faced with constant excuses as to why people didn't come to church, drew up the following list of reasons 'why I never wash':

1. I was forced to as a child.
2. People who wash are hypocrites. They think they are cleaner than everybody else.
3. There are so many different kinds of soap, I can't decide which one is best.
4. I used to wash, but I got bored and stopped.
5. I wash only on special occasions, like Christmas and Easter.
6. None of my friends wash.
7. I'll start washing when I get older and dirtier.
8. I can't spare the time.
9. The bathroom is never warm enough in winter or cool enough in summer.
10. People who make soap are only after your money.

*Two snowmen were standing side by side. One said to the other:
"Can you smell carrots?"*



Holy Trinity's minibus now available for use!

Back in March, Holy Trinity became the proud owners of a 17 seater minibus. As a next step, Stuart Wright and Hannah Hidden both successfully completed their Minibus Driving Evaluations, and the minibus was in service.

Over the next 9 months its use was wide and various; groups from Youth Fellowship went to Easter and Summer camps and trips to the seaside, young people from the community went to 'The Life of Christ' at Wintershall, 'Nflame' and also to Stuart's house for DV8 Bible study. Staff members had 'away days' and training weekends and used it to collect visitors from airports and railway stations. The minibus was also invaluable for transporting equipment to and from the recreation ground for the Flower Show.

However, its use was not, and is not, restricted to Holy Trinity activities. Anyone holding a full driving licence and insurance is able to drive it, and recently it has been borrowed by St Peter's, Norbiton, and Claygate Scouts.

By the time you read this, some modifications will have been made to make the bus more 'user friendly' for the less agile members of the community. Two seats are being removed; a hand rail is being fitted and a step up will be available.

So whether you are from Holy Trinity, from any other church or part of an organisation within the community who feel they could make use of this facility, please contact the minibus booking secretary, Judi Curtis, via the church office and hopefully we will be able to help you.

Alpha courses

The Alpha course has become hugely popular, all around the world, as a way of discovering what Christianity is all about and enabling people to voice their doubts and questions in a friendly and non-threatening environment.

People who live in Claygate are fortunate in that the course is available to them, without leaving the village, twice every year. The course which began at Holy Trinity in September is just finishing but a new one begins in January. Comprising twelve weekly sessions, each beginning with a meal together, the course is free.

If you're interested in joining the next course, or would like to know more, please call the Church Office on 01372 463603.

Confirmation

If you have never been confirmed in the Church of England and wonder whether it is about time you were, you will want to know that there will be an opportunity next year. Please speak to the Church Office (01372 463603) to explore joining a confirmation class.

Holiday Club

Parents of children of primary age who have been to one of Holy Trinity's half-term Holiday Clubs, or who have heard about them, will be pleased to hear that planning is under way for the February half term. The exciting theme this time will be *Space Quest* and the dates on which it will run are Tuesday 14th February to Friday 17th February. Another very popular event is in prospect but, as in the past, there will have to be limits on the numbers of children signed up.

IN YOUR CHRISTMAS MAGAZINE



CHRISTMAS IN CLAYGATE
Details of special events and church services - pages 6 & 7

THE DA VINCI CODE
Thriller reviewed - pages 8 & 9

THE THREE WISE MEN
A look at the Bible - page 10

THE FEAST OF STEPHEN
Also known as Boxing Day:
the background - page 11

and a great deal more
about what's going on

A new price for Insight

Welcome to this free Christmas issue of Holy Trinity's Parish Magazine.

You can keep in touch by having every month's issue delivered to you, but after several years of holding down costs, the price goes up next month. The cover price will be 50p and an annual subscription will cost £4. If you live outside our free distribution area, you can take out a UK-wide postal subscription for £7. The magazine is also available on Holy Trinity's website.

A new Vicar for Holy Trinity Claygate

Applications from those interested in becoming the next Vicar of Claygate were due to be received by 23rd November. They will be sifted to produce a shortlist of those to be invited to interviews, which will be held in January. There are three groups involved in the selection process: Holy Trinity's own representatives; the Bishop of Guildford and his representatives; and Holy Trinity's patrons, the Church Patronage Trust, who are conducting the process. Since the person selected will have to extract themselves from present commitments, it may be around Easter that Claygate has a new Vicar.

...and our last one

Julian Henderson, who left at the end of September on his appointment as the Archdeacon of Dorking, has been elected for a five-year term as a member of the new General Synod of the Church of England, whose first session began on 15th November.



How well does the BBC treat religion?

The BBC is not properly representing the religious life of the nation, a House of Lords Select Committee was told on 2nd November. Five representatives of different faiths in Britain - two Christians (the Bishop of Southwark, Tom Butler, and the Director of the Evangelical Alliance, Joel Edwards), a Muslim, a Hindu and a Sikh - appeared before the Committee considering the review of the BBC's Charter. They were united in suggesting that the BBC's output reflected "the metropolitan liberal and secular elite" and treated religion patchily and cursorily, often from a position of lack of understanding.

They pointed out that in the 2001 Census almost 72% of the population declared that they were Christian, but this was scarcely recognised in the BBC's treatment of religion. Challenged by one Committee member about the number of these who actually went to church, Tom Butler responded that the numbers who attended church were greater than the membership of all the political parties put together, but no one suggested that this was an argument for the BBC's not covering politics.

Almost inevitably, Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* was raised, with the question whether it should not also allow expression of a humanist perspective. The faith leaders argued that the rest of the 150-minute Today programme already reflected that perspective, and the unique value of what was only a two-and-a-half minute slot for *Thought for the Day* was that it added a spiritual dimension which surveys had demonstrated was appreciated by listeners.

Are these your favourite hymns?

Viewers of *Songs of Praise* recently voted for their favourite hymns. The ten that emerged at the top of the list were:

1. How great thou art
2. Dear Lord and Father of mankind
3. The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended
4. Be thou my vision
5. Love divine, all loves excelling
6. Be still, for the presence of the Lord
7. Make me a channel of you peace
8. Guide me, O thou great Redeemer
9. In Christ alone
10. Shine Jesus shine

The list is a mixture of the traditional (the first five, plus number 8) and the modern, but many of our readers would no doubt want to modify the list with their own favourites. Of the modern compositions, *In Christ alone* has captured people's hearts remarkably quickly, having succeeded in getting into the top ten only three years after it was written.

One of Holy Trinity's favourite modern hymnwriters, Tim Dudley-Smith (the former Bishop of Thetford, who has written 300 hymns and was awarded the OBE in 2003 for services to hymnody), was not represented in the top ten, but he is clearly very well attuned to public taste: he succeeded in predicting no fewer than eight of the hymns that made the list (he missed out on *Be thou my vision* and *Guide me, O thou great Redeemer*).

Asked for his own favourite hymn, Bishop Dudley-Smith was reported as finding it impossible to pick out just one, but said "My heart always lifts when I find Charles Wesley on the hymn board". Many of us would say amen to that.

Young people today....

It is the time of year for calendar days of note, Halloween has been and gone, Bonfire night has slipped by along with the autumn leaves and so has Remembrance day, people of distinction remembered despite the passing of time. But as the nights draw in, our attention is drawn towards Advent and ultimately Christmas.

Presents seem to be the recurrent theme of this season, with the question ringing loud: what do we want, or perhaps more importantly what can we get? I hear tell that the iPod nano is even more fragile than the iPod mini, and the original iPod is now just so 2004. The debate rages about whether it is worth getting any of the above with so many phones now offering similar services. Oh, the tyranny of Christmas; that such topics should vex the minds of those young people that we know and love.

I already have my Advent Calendar given to me by my Mum and it sits patiently waiting to be opened. There is no mystery as to what will be behind the 25th window. It is not going to be a choice between a small wooden duck, a trumpet, a drummer boy or the nativity scene in glorious French window framed grandeur. It will be the latter. And that, for me at least, does not diminish the enjoyment of what will come at the end of the wait. I know that it will be the nativity scene and that there will be a donkey somewhere in shot (even though the gospel accounts never mention one.)

The abundance of choice that advertisers present is not the panacea that we are led to believe in our dreams. Indeed, it becomes the stuff of nightmares as expecta-

tions of what we 'deserve' exceed the reality. It may come to pass that a young person may receive an iPod and be disappointed because they want an iPod nano. This is not beyond the realms of our imagination or sadly, experience.

To change the subject completely, the winter snows will come to the South Asian earthquake zone from the 1st of December. 55,000 people have died already and perhaps the best present that some of those affected will receive this Christmas is a lifesaving amputation. As and when we come across anyone moaning or griping about what they did or did not get for Christmas, please feel free to challenge them about what really matters. Life.

The nativity scene is worth reflecting on because in it we see God beginning something that we *so* do not deserve. In the humble surroundings of a stable with mass infanticide in the offing, Jesus the Son of God was born. God reached out to the human race amidst our suffering whether it is here in Claygate or in Southern Asia. He offers us hope that transcends our circumstances whatever they may be.

Read either Matthew or Luke this Christmas and see how the Christmas story fits into the rest of the Gospel. Do not just take my word for it that hope is there for you this Christmas time, make this Christmas one to remember and find out for yourself.

Asa

Tricks to play on Santa - 1

Instead of milk and biscuits, leave him a salad and a note explaining that you think he could stand to lose a few pounds.

While he's in the house, go out to his sleigh and write him a parking ticket.

Learning from the Bible

It is the gospel writer Matthew who tells us that Magi came from the east to worship the baby Jesus after his birth. He doesn't tell us much about them, where they came from, what their names were (the names Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar were given to them much later) or even how many of them there were (tradition has assumed three only because Matthew describes three gifts which they presented to Jesus).

Matthew doesn't even specify that they were men, though that is a reasonable assumption to make given the realities of ancient life. Some of a more modern way of thinking also accept that assumption, arguing that if they had been women they would have stopped to ask directions and arrived more promptly, would have helped to deliver the baby, cleaned out the stable and put a casserole on to cook!

We are not even very sure what 'Magi' were. The word comes from the same Greek root from which we get 'magic', but some see them as astrologers because it was a star that led them. Often we portray them as kings ('We three kings from orient are'), and this is because the prophecy of Isaiah had much to say heralding the coming of Jesus, including 'Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn' (Isaiah 60.3).

Perhaps most usually we see them simply as Three Wise Men. Their wisdom shines through the story that Matthew tells, and let us consider briefly just three examples.

"After Jesus was born, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem."

Matthew, chap. 2, verse 1

First, they were wise in their decision to search for the meaning of the star. They didn't have all the information to reach a considered judgement on its significance, but they were sufficiently perceptive to see that it was worth investigating further.

Secondly, they were wise to persist in their search. Their journey must have been long, arduous and costly - the fact that after meeting them and finding out when they first saw the star, King Herod ordered the slaughter of all boys up to the age of 24 months shows that the search had been a lengthy one (contrary to the usual Nativity play, Matthew does not say that Jesus was still lying in a stable manger by the time the Wise Men arrived).

Thirdly, they were wise in discerning what advice to seek and what to reject. They sought information about where the Messiah was expected to be born, but set aside Herod's hypocritical request to be told once they found him so that he too could worship the Messiah.

There are lessons for us all here. Do we have sufficient wisdom to see that, though we don't yet understand, there is something important that we should find out more about, being persistent in our quest and recognising which of the messages reaching us to accept and which to ignore? Exploring what Christmas truly means could make a big difference to you.

- *Scribatus*

*Remember the reason for the season
- it's Jesus' birthday, not yours!*

CHRISTMAS SERVICES AT HOLY TRINITY

SUNDAY 11th DECEMBER at 10 am

This will be Holy Trinity's annual Toy Service, when children are invited to bring an unwrapped toy to give to Barnardo's as a present for less fortunate children. After last Christmas, Barnardo's sent "a big thank you" to Holy Trinity and all the children who gave presents. "We had to find presents for 350 children from homeless families, without a budget to pay for them. Thanks to you, I didn't have to try to explain to disappointed children why Father Christmas wasn't coming to their party."

There are also Services of Holy Communion that day at 8 am and 6.30 pm

SUNDAY 18th DECEMBER at 6.30 pm

The traditional Carol Service is one of Holy Trinity's most popular services, with readings, carols for all the congregation and contributions from the choir.

We expect the church to be full for the occasion.

There are also services that day at 8 am (said Holy Communion) and 10 am (All Age Holy Communion)

CHRISTMAS EVE, SATURDAY 24th DECEMBER

At 3 pm and 5 pm: Christingle Services

Nothing is more popular than Christingle, which is why we have to have two services to accommodate everyone - especially children - who wants to come. We suggest that surnames from A to M come at 3 pm, from N to Z at 5 pm.

At 11 pm: Midnight Holy Communion

CHRISTMAS MORNING, SUNDAY 25th DECEMBER

At 8 am: Holy Communion (said, from the Book of Common Prayer)

At 10 am: All Age Christmas Morning Praise

There are no other services on Christmas Day, either at 11.30 am or at 6.30 pm

CHRISTMAS EVENTS IN THE VILLAGE

SATURDAY 3rd DECEMBER, from 4 pm

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS EVENT in THE PARADE

The Parade will be closed to traffic for this big event of the Claygate year, with stalls, refreshments, children's rides, performances, carol singing and a celebrity's ceremonial switching on of the Christmas lights

FRIDAY 9th DECEMBER at 7.30 pm

The Richard Jenner Memorial Trust present

AN EVENING OF SEASONAL MUSIC

with Kathryn Harries and friends,
not to mention mince pies and wine

In Holy Trinity Church - Tickets cost £12.50 booked in advance

SATURDAY 10th DECEMBER at 7.30 pm

CANDLELIGHT CHRISTMAS A feast of Yuletide music and carols

to benefit the Princess Alice Hospice

hosted by Frank Renton with special guest Chris Tarrant,
Kathryn Hide (soprano), Richard Lyne (organ), the Pegasus Choir
and Matthew Altham (conductor) - and mince pies and wine
In Holy Trinity Church - Tickets £15 , from the Hospice in advance

SUNDAY 11th DECEMBER, at 4 pm

CAROLS ON THE VILLAGE GREEN

accompanied by the Scout Band, with refreshments from Claygate Village WI

Organised by the Claygate Village Association

SATURDAY 17th DECEMBER at 7.30 pm

HANDEL'S MESSIAH

sung by Claygate Choral Society under their conductor Martyn Daldorph
In Holy Trinity Church, tickets £12.50 from 01372 810376 or on the door

"On the Feast of Stephen...."

We all know that when Good King Wenceslas looked out, it was on the Feast of Stephen, "when the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even". This was the day after Christmas, but what does St Stephen's Day mean to us?

St Stephen's Day, celebrated on 26th December, commemorates the first Christian martyr, Stephen, put to death in about the year 35 AD.

What we know of him comes from chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Acts in the Bible. He was one of the first seven deacons of the Christian Church. As a man said to be "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (verse 5) and "full of God's grace and power" (verse 8), he'd been appointed by the apostles to look after the distribution of alms to the faithful poor, and to help in the ministry of preaching.

The Bible passages seem to suggest that Stephen was an educated Hellenistic (Greek speaking) Jew. Certainly his challenge to Jewish leaders reveals him to have been learned in the Scriptures and the history of Judaism, besides being eloquent and forceful. It seems to have been his very effectiveness which earned him the enmity of other Hellenist Jews and led to a conspiracy to denounce him to the authorities for blasphemy.

Stephen's proclamation on the day of his martyrdom pulled no punches. Addressing the Sanhedrin (the council of Jewish leaders) in his defence, he recalled the history of the Jews and their disobedience to God's law. The Temple was but a temporary institution destined to be fulfilled and superseded by Christ, who was the prophet foreseen by Moses as the Messiah for whom the Jewish race had so long waited. Stephen then challenged his hearers for resisting the Spirit and for

killing the Christ, as their fathers before them had killed the prophets. The Jews were so outraged that they dragged him out of the city and stoned him on the spot.

As he died, Stephen saw a vision of Christ on God's right hand. The men who were witness to the stoning placed their clothes at the feet of the young Saul, later to be himself converted and take the name of Paul, the greatest evangelist of all.

By the fourth century Stephen had his own feast day in both East and West Churches. When his supposed tomb was discovered in 415, his popularity soared. His (supposed) relics were taken to Constantinople and then Rome, along with some stones (allegedly) used at his martyrdom.

In early days, the Church made Stephen the patron saint of deacons. In the late Middle Ages he was also invoked against headaches (!).

In England, 46 ancient churches are dedicated to him, most of them built after the Norman Conquest. When portrayed in art, Stephen is usually given a book of the Gospels and a stone, and sometimes the palm of martyrdom.

Tricks to play on Santa - 2

Leave him a note explaining that you've gone away for Christmas. Ask if he would mind watering your plants.

Leave a note telling Santa that Mrs. Claus telephoned to ask him to pick up some milk and a loaf of bread on his way home.

Historical facts or discredited fabrications?

Why do I find myself writing a review of the *Da Vinci Code*? I must confess that for a long time I resisted reading the book. I knew that it made some startling claims about Jesus and Christianity, but I was so confident that no one would take its claims seriously that I put off reading it. The reason I finally picked it up, was the most compelling of all – my mother-in-law told me to read it!

The *Da Vinci Code* makes some incredible claims. It suggests that Jesus was nothing more than a prophet, was married to Mary Magdalene, that he intended her to carry on the leadership of the church after him and that after his death she bore his daughter. Moreover, the religion Jesus founded was in fact a pagan, goddess-worshipping church.

However, a conspiracy starting with Peter and continuing through the plots of the official church sought to suppress this and changed Christianity into a misogynistic Jesus-worshipping power-crazed den of evil-doers. And so the truth about Mary Magdalene and the subsequent bloodline of her daughter had to go underground – preserved in secret documents guarded by the mysterious Priory of Sion. The struggles with the Catholic Church then seem to account for a lot of history – not least the Crusades and the Fall of the Templars.

The reason I find myself writing this review is two-fold. One is the example of a nun sitting on her own outside a British cathedral campaigning against the filming of the screen play in the cathedral. The second is that I then read *The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code* and was amazed that *USA Today* had described the *Da Vinci Code* as “historic fact with a contemporary storyline.” Brown himself has said, “All the history, artwork, ancient documents, and secret rituals in the novel are accurate.”

I have to come clean and confess that I didn't really enjoy the book. One of the main reason for this was that, having studied history at university and then taught it at secondary school, I struggled with the inaccurate historical claims with which it is littered. Space does not permit me to go into even the more glaring ones.

It is not just the historical claims which are so misplaced, but also the claims about the origins of the Church and in particular

Dan Brown's fictional thriller The Da Vinci Code has not only been a Number 1 bestseller, but has persuaded many people that it is based on fact. David King has got round to reading it.

the conspiracy surrounding the writing of scripture. Rather than being misogynist, the New Testament writers affirm the importance of women. Indeed, taken in the cultural context of the time this affirmation is remarkable. The central event for Christianity is the death and resurrection of Jesus. The supposedly misogynist gospel writers record that the most prominent group to stay by Jesus as he was being killed were the women who followed him. As to the resurrection, its significance to Christianity is wide-ranging, but one of the most important aspects is the way in which it points to Jesus being God. And yet the gospel writers, rather than showing misogynist tendencies, record the key witnesses to the resurrection as being women - even though in the culture of the time the testimony of women was inadmissible as evidence to an event. So the early church's claim to Jesus' divinity is founded on the assertion of the importance of women – something which the *Da Vinci* conspiracy cannot explain. Furthermore, at Christmas time we are all too aware of how prominent another woman (the virgin Mary) was to the Christmas story.

What is more, the major inaccuracies in the bold historical and theological claims are matched in other areas, namely his analysis of symbolism and art criticism. So if the *Da Vinci Code* is so riddled with inaccuracies and wild assertions, why has it persuaded so many? As a conspiracy theory, it entices us with the prospect of undermining institutions with truths which “they” want to hide from us. It also plays on our post-modern suspicions about institutions and how they use “truth claims” to maintain their authority. Herein lies the appeal of the *Da Vinci Code*, since it challenges the faceless power-brokers (in this case the Catholic Church) and so raises up the individual

and the down-trodden. In and of itself this is a good tendency. Institutions are human and so share all of the faults of human beings without always the morality born of interpersonal contact. Moreover, truth claims by institutions are similarly prone to the same failings.

The problem with the *Da Vinci Code* is that its own truth claims rest for their authority on discredited and wild assertions. It claims that the church is using false claims to the truth to wield power, and yet then proceeds to do worse. So whilst it is good to question and challenge the “truth” put forward by interested parties, it is wrong to do so on the basis of engineered evidence and unsupported assertions, many of which are palpably wrong.

The biggest problem with the challenge to the notion of truth and authority presented by the conspiracy theory and post-modernism is that it ultimately rests on placing ourselves as the ultimate source of truth. Such a belief raises us as individuals to unimaginable, even god-like, status. At the same time though, it leaves us with a deep insecurity since we have no one but ourselves to rely on. Such a condition is known in the Bible as sin. Ultimately there is an ultimate authority: it is not the government, it is not any Church institution (whether established or not), rather it is Jesus Christ, the absolute revelation of God, whose person is revealed by his Spirit through Scripture.

And so we are brought back to a nun sitting outside a Cathedral, mocked by many as a figure of fun, because she has missed the point that it was only a novel. In fact she has grasped the reality, namely that the claims made about Jesus in the *Da Vinci Code* are false. Instead, that baby born in a manger on the first Christmas was in reality God himself and he would go on to give himself up to death and then to rise again triumphant so that we, both women and men, might enter into an eternal relationship with him. Even if I were not a Christian, I would believe the *Da Vinci Code* to be fatally flawed, but since like that nun I am a Christian, the main reason I cannot regard it as a good book is that it denigrates the one who died for me and with whom I talk every day.