



# St Columba's

December 2020/January 2021

# ST COLUMBA'S CHURCH OF SCOTLAND



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## Sundays

Please join us for worship at 11 am. The crèche is open from 10.30 am for babies and children up to four years. It can be found in the lower hall. Older children are invited to join the Sunday school classes appropriate to their age. They leave the service with their teachers following the children's talk. For teenagers, the senior study group leave with their teachers following the Bible readings. After the service, we warmly welcome everyone to the congregational lunch in the lower hall. The two-course lunch costs £3.50 and there is no need to book.



## Dear Readers,

St Columba's members have been busy during the months of lockdown. Susan Pym acted as Vice Convener of the General Assembly Business Committee (page 5), Sebi Williams was presented with a 'Child of Courage' award by David Beckham (page 7), Ian Aitcheson marched with servicemen at the Remembrance day service in Whitehall (page 14), and Jean Macpherson has published a book (page 13).

For those who only stand and wait, or sit and read, we hope this Christmas edition provides some inspiration. Jean Stevenson has ideas for your Christmas shopping list, though you may be tempted to sneak a peek before wrapping the parcels. Jim Blackwood takes us out into the crisp winter countryside both in the London area and around Lochwinnoch. Catharine Robertson writes about the challenging but rewarding experience of being a Commissioner at a virtual General Assembly. Hilary Natzler looks back to the birth of Jesus and encourages us to tread softly as we move forward into the coming year.

Don't forget to renew your magazine subscription, or perhaps take one out if you'd like to receive your copy through the post.

With very best wishes for Christmas and the New Year,

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## VESTRY LETTER



December 2020/January 2021

Dear Friends,

*"I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,  
and in his word I put my hope.  
I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the  
morning,  
more than watchmen wait for the morning."*

Psalm 130

December is a waiting time. In the Church calendar it is Advent – four Sundays that precede Christmas; a time of making ready. The Psalmist's type of waiting conveys both yearning, (*"my whole being/my soul waits"*) and the on-your-toes readiness of the sentry. In *Praying with the Psalms* the late Eugene Peterson observes: *"The long watches of the night, through which soldiers guard cities and shepherds watch over flocks, are compared with the wait of the soul before God. It is not the waiting of indolence, but of alertness. Waiting is vigilance plus expectation; it is wide awake to God."*

What the shape of Christmas 2020 will eventually look like, it is too early to say. Nevertheless, some traditional preparations will continue. As an acknowledgement that this has been a tough year for many, we aim to send a Christmas card from St Columba's, designed by one of our young people, to everyone in the congregation. The sanctuary will still be made festive with its Christmas tree and candles – even if only viewed remotely. Our services, whether attended in person or via the live stream, will cherish the music and message of the coming Christ child. Importantly, even in lockdown/alternative restrictions we hope to continue to maintain use of the building by school children, support groups and feeding of homeless guests. Hopefully, taken together, these outward signs will help fashion internal preparation and attentiveness to Christ's presence in our everyday world. We can assist that preparation and waiting – finding space to clear thoughts, reading some of the scriptures that mark the season, being still, being observant, being kind, being prayerful.

Understandably, there may be gloom, thinking about things and traditions that won't be possible this year. It is entirely natural to think on loss. But, be encouraged by a recent St Columba's occasion. Just before Lockdown II we had a wedding in the sanctuary. Planned for well over a year, it had gone from full-on big occasion, to thirty guests only, to finally fifteen, courtesy of Government Guidelines. On the Saturday afternoon, as I waited for the bride at the back of the church and looked towards the communion table, and the handful of family and friends in the front pews, including the groom and his best man, I found myself happily surprised. What struck me was not that this was a diminished gathering; on the contrary, by distilling the wedding down to the essentials – bride, groom, closest loved ones, promises, music and prayers, it felt very special. There was an intimacy to the occasion; the reduced company did not feel overwhelmed by the size of the sanctuary. Stripped of some of the traditional fripperies that accompany weddings, it was easier to see what was important – an exchange and promise of love. Vigilant and expectant - maybe that will be the gift we discover this Christmas.

May you have a profound Advent and a joyous Christmas when it dawns.

Angus MacLeod

# General Assembly 2020

by Catharine Robertson

Before 2020, if anyone had suggested that the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland could be run entirely online, the politest reaction you'd have heard would have been, 'Cannae be done'. Fast forward a year and in 2020, for the first time, the General Assembly went 'virtual'.

Covid or no Covid, the business of the Kirk needs to continue. A physical meeting of 700 odd in May 2020 in the Assembly Hall on the Mound was out of the question. Yet there were things which needed to be brought to the General Assembly and could not be stood over to 2021. A virtual Assembly was the answer. More than half the usual Assembly business was dispensed with to compress the whole thing into a Friday evening and all day Saturday on the first weekend in October. 'There'll be some training the week before', said Susan Pym to me after church one Sunday in September. 'Make sure you sign up, it's important.'

Susan was well placed to know just how important: as vice-convenor of the Assembly Business Committee she was to be one of the very few actually sitting in the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh and running the event. We, the Commissioners, using all manner of IT equipment old and new in our homes in all corners of Scotland and beyond, were all going to have to learn how to participate in a Zoom webinar for 700 odd people (and Zoom for that many all at once is a bit of an ask). On top of that we needed to learn how to log into and work the 'Assembly Hub' application specially written for the event, and – here's where it got tricky – learn how to keep both the Zoom meeting and the Hub going at one and the same time. If we couldn't do it, we shouldn't be able to speak or vote.

During the training sessions in the week before the Assembly the tech team in Edinburgh rose to the challenge. Over and over again, with unchanging good humour and infinite patience, they explained how to set up a machine, or, if possible, two linked machines, so that we could be part of the virtual Assembly. Many were the virtual cries for help, and as the week went on extra video training clips kept appearing on the website to coach us in the IT skills the tech team could now all too clearly see some of us lacked. If the helplessness of some appalled them they never betrayed it, nor did they let us see how worried they were either, and yet they must have been. This was new software and we all knew that, however carefully the whole thing had been tried out beforehand, the real test would only come when the Assembly opened.

So to the Friday evening. Fire up laptop, launch Zoom meeting: connect extra screen, make sure I can get from one screen to the other and back, log into the Assembly Hub. Place mug of coffee next to machine (you can't do that in Edinburgh!). It seemed strange to see an almost-empty Assembly Hall with only a handful of people, Susan among them, at the top table. We opened with prayer, and video messages of goodwill from other churches were shown. Friday evening's business was mostly uncontroversial, but it served as a proving ground. We had to wait until we were told that an item was open for voting, watch our voting screens in the Hub to see the voting buttons come up, then hit the right button and wait for the icon which told us our votes had been logged. The first few votes went through - and then, with 700 people all trying to vote at once, the

Hub started crashing. Not a good omen, but the Moderator, fully aware of the problems, in a calm and genial manner encouraged everyone to wait while the tech team got us all back on track. Some of us lost a few chances to vote that evening, though fortunately not on any controversial matter and not in any way that was likely to disturb the results.

By the next morning – had the tech team worked through the night, I wonder? – we were ready to go, with a whole lot of fresh tips available about how to work the system to best effect. And it did work quite a lot better on the Saturday. It was different, of course. There could be no singing in the opening devotions. The Moderator delivered his sermon to an all but empty hall. There could be no meeting up between sessions as there would be in Edinburgh, and no chance to get to know new people from far distant parishes, but as speakers were 'brought to the front' we saw a huge variety of people and places. Some had given more thought to their backgrounds than others. Most settled for their sitting room or study, large or small, well-lit or dim, tidy or less so. One Minister appeared in clerical dress in a book-lined study, another Minister in plain clothes had his Rangers scarf and souvenirs prominently in view behind his desk, and yet another, a frequent speaker, favoured virtual backgrounds and used at least four during the day ranging from the top of his local mountain to what someone identified as the Oval Office. We were reminded too of the huge range and reach of our church, with contributions from the Minister in Budapest and from a Minister in the Western Isles who started in Gaelic and then shifted to English.

# General Assembly 2020

Continued

So what was it all about? What couldn't wait until next year? Last year's Radical Action Plan reformed the Kirk's central management and this year the new Chief Officer, who spoke forcefully and well, reported on how the Plan will have to be changed further in response to Covid. We have had to close churches for worship at a time when membership is in continuing decline, and though many churches have risen to the challenge of 'doing church' online some may never reopen. Long-standing custom requires congregational meetings to approve closures or mergers. We needed reform so that these could be held online if need be. Budgets are being cut for 2021. The Ministries and Mission contributions for 2021 will be slashed by 18% in recognition of congregations' loss of offerings and lettings income during lockdown, but a reformed system is on its way for 2022. The General Trustees, who do not want to see

money spent on a building which might soon be closed, will from now on exert much tighter control over building work in churches. The future of 121 George Street is under review as well.

In a strongly-worded deliverance after energetic debate the Assembly reaffirmed that racism is a sin and that Black Lives Matter. The Assembly also adopted a target of 'net zero carbon emissions' both nationally and at local level by 2030. There was no room in 2020's slimmed-down Assembly for a report from the trustees who set the Church's investment policy, but whether or not the Church should sell its shares in oil companies is bound to be a hot topic when the Assembly next meets. Net zero carbon by 2030 may be a challenge for us locally too. We have gas stoves, gas boilers and a gathered congregation, some travelling long distances to church.

All in all was the virtual GA a success? Yes, it was. This Assembly showed that the Church of Scotland isn't quite as stuck in its ways as many thought. To be sure, there were issues, but they were minor in the scale of things. Lessons will certainly have been learned. Everyone at the centre is to be congratulated for making it work so well, particularly the indefatigable tech team. Does that mean we do not need to hold week-long meetings on the Mound in future? No. Meetings in person still have a value. The Assembly as a major annual event keeps the Church in the public eye, and a lot of business was squeezed out this time which benefits from scrutiny. Could we build on the 2020 experiment and try a hybrid model in future with some Commissioners in the Assembly Hall and some online? Who knows?



*Susan Pym was Vice Convener of the Assembly business committee in an unusual year. She writes: 'The Top Table folk all had to be trained to use the Assembly Hub which was a platform created specially for all Commissioners to read and vote on deliverances, any amendments or counter motions. We then trained all Commissioners in five online sessions so that by the time we started the GA everyone knew what they were doing. I ran all the voting so had to keep my wits about me to ensure the correct counter motion etc appeared on the screens and then I opened and closed the voting. By the time we finished on the Saturday evening we were tired and had sore backs from sitting for so long. However we were delighted to get through all the business necessary for the Church of Scotland and congregations to move forward.'*

# The Nativity – footprints

by Hilary Natzler

The story of the babe born in Bethlehem of Judaea enthralled us year after year. Why so? We all have experience directly or indirectly of a birth in the family: the anxious waiting, the climax, the joy, the hope for the future. **The magic of creation.** What makes Christ's birth so wondrous, even to those for whom it has no religious significance? Its truth? Its simplicity? Its apparent peacefulness? What we know of his life and death?

Imagine that well known story retold in our time. Joseph calls a cab or bundles Mary into the car, they rush off to an overheated hospital, Mary is hooked up to high tech machinery that beeps intermittently and charts the unborn heartbeat. She is offered pain relief and labours on. The first cry and, what joy, the babe is put in her arms. Bright lights, noise and bustle welcome him to the world.

The good news is tapped into a mobile phone – a young nurse helps Joseph who's not quite up to speed with the gadget – and pings off to recipients around the world. Three wise men fly in on jets from Iran, India and Arabia bringing their gifts. Slight problems at the airport with visas and inappropriate items in luggage, but they gain entry, and fast cars (they are kings after all; Ubers wouldn't suffice) deliver them swiftly to the hospital. Some local farmers have beaten them to the bedside. No matter. Gifts are presented, not least some hand cream for Mary (all that handwashing) and a babygrow or three – you can never have too many.

We have so much to learn from the Christmas story. The carbon footprint of the Holy Family is negligible. They walk or ride on a donkey, they repurpose a manger, they share a stable heated by an ox and an ass, and light comes from a rather big star. Their homeland is husbanded by shepherds who look after fellow creatures day and night, and tend natural pastures. Visitors from afar arrive on camels which leave not so



much as a hoof print in the desert sand.

**The magic of creation** leaves us duty bound to nurture it whether it be a baby or the world we live in and wish him to live in. We have been gifted life and an unpolluted world. How are we stewarding it for future generations?

We have gifts to guide us from three modern day wise men: David Attenborough's latest film, *A Life on our Planet*, Tim Berners-Lee's book, *How bad are Bananas?* and Tony Juniper's book, *What has Nature ever done for Us?* We all, and all Governments...wait for it...have to listen to the science (I wonder where that turn of phrase came from... must've heard it somewhere).

David Attenborough points out that *homo sapiens* is outbreeding other species and taking more than the lion's share of the earth's bounty. To reduce the population we need to equalise living standards throughout the globe. Where there's confidence in the survival of the next generation, birth rates drop and our impact on resources is reduced. He calls on us to stop investing in fossil fuels and instead to harness renewable energy from

the sun and wind. Renewables never run out, nor do they produce carbon. He emphasises the need for healthy oceans, which are critical to reducing carbon dioxide as well as being a source of food. Where fishing is restricted, the protected fish populations, exhausted by subsidised fishing fleets, multiply and recover. The planet cannot support large numbers of meat eaters. We need to change our diet – a plant eating population requires half the farmland given over to animal farming, releasing land to return to its wilderness state: to come back to life. Deforestation must stop. Forests best lock away carbon and are centres of biodiversity, which is a source of medicines. He urges us to take care of nature and to live in balance with it. It is our biggest ally. We and all species thrive only if everything around us thrives.

Tim Berners-Lee suggests that we can take a big step forward towards a low-carbon world if everyone in Europe adopts a lifestyle that causes no more than 5 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent to be emitted per year. That is the total climate change impact of all the greenhouse gases (methane, nitrous oxide included) caused by an item or activity expressed in terms of carbon dioxide. The current average per UK citizen is 13 tonnes.

The appendix to the book gives a rough guide to calculating these footprints. A return flight to Hong Kong burns up about 4.5 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, leaving just 500 kilos in the budget that year for everything else: food, heating, public services, healthcare, the maintenance of roads and our petrol thirsty car. Those bananas by the way use up only 0.7 kilos of carbon dioxide equivalent per kilo whereas asparagus from Peru uses a hefty 18.5 kilos of carbon dioxide equivalent per kilo. How we budget in carbon dioxide equivalent, rather than sterling, is laid out in his fascinating and useful book. Now

# The Nativity – footprints

Continued

there's a project for the New Year, and not just for new parents.

Tony Juniper exposes how nature provides essential services to us for free, services which each year are worth about double global GDP. We take them for granted...until they switch off. The various impactful stories tell how creation can work for us most wonderfully and they give warnings about how we disrupt this. In India antibiotics fed to cattle killed the vultures that cleaned up dead carcasses, resulting in a boom in wild dogs that do the job less thoroughly and led to an epidemic of rabies.

In Colombia high up in the Andes above Bogota is the *paramo* or desolate territory. There the curious-looking *Espeletia* shrubs snatch water from low wisps of clouds and funnel it through their stems into the ground where it is stored for slow release, supplying the city's inhabitants with fresh water. Green infrastructure for free. A garden of Eden, you may think, but no... footprints. Farmers are encroaching on this wild natural habitat and the vegetation is uprooted and replaced with potato crops. When the tubers are harvested the soil is completely exposed. Heavy rains wash it into

the rivers and clog up reservoirs, resulting in flash floods and a muddy water supply. That perfect balance of creation is being interfered with by myopic mankind taking decisions, no doubt with worthy intentions, but without an awareness of their implications.

The Nativity is a simple story that reminds us to live simply. It is a story of divine love coming into the world and teaches us to cherish all of creation as ourselves.

Happy Christmas!

Tread softly through the New Year!

## Child of Courage 2020

If you happened to be watching television on the evening of Sunday 1st November you might have seen the familiar St Columba's faces of the Williams family. Sebastian Williams, a member of our Sunday School, was presented with a **Pride of Britain 'Child of Courage'** award for helping his mother Suzanne when she fell down a 100 metre gorge on Ben Cruachan after taking a wrong turning on a steep path during a family walk last autumn.

While his father Derek looked after his sisters Francesca and Natasha, 11 year old Sebi climbed down the gorge to reach his seriously injured mother and used her mobile phone to summon help, ensuring that she maintained consciousness until the mountain rescue services arrived.

The mountain rescue post said: *'It takes a while to deal with this sort of situation and the lady was very lucky she stopped where she did as a large drop awaited below. After her injuries were treated the best we could in the situation, she was ready to winch. All the while the lad was with his mum talking to her.'* ... *'Just getting to his mum was hard, then looking after his mother in an extreme situation, talking to the police and keeping calm - he was amazing.'*

Sebi's 'Child of Courage' award was presented by David Beckham. Some quotes from family members capture the excitement of the event:

*'It was wonderful taking part in Pride of Britain this year. We are so, so happy for Sebi to be recognised and receive the Award which is a fantastic achievement!'*

*'It was lovely meeting David Beckham who was just such a family man, great with the children, really understated and very kind. Sebi is now the proud owner of a signed England shirt and football!'*

*'Phil Coburn took the photos... what an inspiration. Phil was in a Taliban attack in Afghanistan and very nearly lost his life. He had both legs amputated but was just getting on with life and such an amazing person: it was a joy to welcome him into our home and thank you to Phil for the pictures and memories.'*

*'We are so grateful that we are all together as a family and Suzanne's injuries are all but healed. A massive thank you to Oban Mountain Rescue, the Coastguard helicopter crew, the many, many staff at Glasgow Royal Infirmary & Queen Elizabeth hospitals whose skills, compassion, dedication and kindness saw us through this ordeal, to our families*

*and of course all at St Columba's for their continuing support throughout this year. It has been wonderful.'*

Finally from Sebi himself: *'It is lovely to be rewarded with the 'Child of Courage' award but I'm just really happy to have my mum.'*



Sebi's award was presented by David Beckham  
Photo credit: Philip Coburn

# Sermon

## Sermon preached at St Columba's Pont Street by Revd Angus MacLeod on Sunday 8th November 2020 at 10.45am, Remembrance Sunday

In 1928, after lying in state in the original St Columba's church building, allowing thousands of mourners, many of them veterans, to pass his coffin and offer their respects, church elder Field Marshal Douglas Haig was carried from this place – there is old Pathé film footage – so commencing the long public journey – from Westminster Abbey, to St Giles, Edinburgh, before eventual resting place in the ruined beauty of Dryburgh Abbey by the banks of the Tweed. Amid the massive ceremony of it all, the Field Marshal's coffin would have passed one landmark he knew particularly well – the grave of the Unknown Warrior, laid to rest in Westminster Abbey, on Armistice Day, November 11th, two years after the end of World War I, one hundred years ago this Wednesday.

In 1916, Army Padre/Chaplain David Railton, serving on the Western Front was moved by the sight of a wooden cross inscribed 'An Unknown British Soldier'. In August 1920, Railton wrote to Herbert Ryle, Dean of Westminster, to propose the idea of a national monument for an unknown but representative warrior. Railton was acutely conscious of the many troops who had died and whose whereabouts were simply unknown – the Missing.

Dean Ryle was inspired and approached both King George V and the Prime Minister, David Lloyd-George. The King was sceptical but Lloyd-George was enthusiastic and succeeded in winning him over. In mid-October a government committee was formed to plan the scheme and orders were issued to the Army commander in France to select a body for return to the United Kingdom for burial on Armistice day, just three weeks later.

Four/six bodies (depending on accounts) were selected; chosen because there was no way of identifying their rank or regiment. After dark the presiding officer was led into the hut where the bodies were on covered stretchers. Possibly blindfolded, the senior officer indicated his choice. The unchosen bodies were re-buried and the chosen one transferred to a coffin made from Hampton Court oak, mounted with a sword from King George V's private collection. On the coffin, the inscription: "A British Warrior who fell in the Great War 1914-1918 for King and Country." The next day the coffin was given a guard of honour by the French until being embarked on HMS Verdun, a British battleship, from Boulogne to Dover. Then train to Victoria, where it rested on the night of the 10th.

Enormous crowds gathered to street-line the funeral procession on the 11th. The coffin was covered with the union flag that Padre Railton had used throughout the war, sometimes as shroud, sometimes as communion cloth. "It was" he said, "*literally tinged with the life blood of fellow Britons.*" The funeral cortege halted at the now permanent Cenotaph.

There was an unveiling by the King; at 1100 hrs, a two-minute silence, then on to nearby Westminster Abbey. At the Abbey, in the congregation were nearly 1,000 bereaved mothers or widows. Within that company, place of honour was given to those women who had lost *both* husband and children. The Government had been forced to revise initial plans. First lists appeared too obviously to favour fashionable society. Public outcry demanded priority for bereaved families. The coffin passed through a guard of honour consisting of ninety-six personnel, decorated for gallantry, seventy-four of whom were Victoria Cross winners. At the conclusion of the service, once the Abbey doors were closed, the grave was filled in with earth from the main French battlefields and in time covered with a stone of black Belgian marble.

No one was exactly sure how the public would respond to this new memorial. In the event, they flocked to it. An estimated 1,250,000 people visited the Abbey in the first week.

Mountains of flowers and wreathes were laid at the Cenotaph. Clearly it was a much needed public expression of a private sorrow; giving permission and focus for lament. *The unknown-ness* of the Warrior guaranteed his democracy; an *everyman* – for every parent, every spouse, every child or friend. Former Dean of Westminster, Michael Mayne wrote: "*In honouring this one anonymous man and placing him in this most public part of the Abbey on Remembrance Day 1920 they were making the strongest possible statement about human value; about the worth of every single human.*" Each of us ordinary, at the same time, extraordinary. Unknown. But precious.

What other unknowns might we find precious this Remembrance Sunday? In World War II, approximately 400-500 men from the Caribbean flew as Air Crew in the Royal Air Force – not something widely recognised or understood. Of these, approximately 70 were commissioned as Officers, and 103 decorated for gallantry. I declare an interest – one of those who served, was my late uncle-in-law Clem Brutus. Another was Guyanese actor, musician, writer and poet, Cy Grant. Son of a Moravian minister



# Sermon

continued

and a music teacher mother, in 1941, Grant joined the Royal Air Force, which had extended recruitment to non-white candidates following heavy losses in the early years of the Second World War. He was commissioned as an officer after training in England as a navigator. He joined 103 Squadron, flying out of Lincolnshire as part of a Lancaster crew.

In 1943, on the return leg of a bombing mission into Germany, his plane was shot down over Holland: *“Suddenly I was falling in space and it was like a dream world. I remember being buffeted by the wind and being jolted as the parachute opened. You could hear dogs barking and then the next sensation was a huge shadow looming up in front of you, and that was the earth.”* He was taken in by a Dutch farmer’s pregnant wife; sixty-five years later, returning to Holland, he met the daughter. When the local police officer handed him over to German forces, Grant briefly considered evasion: *“At that moment it occurred to me that escape would be pretty futile. Here I was with my blue RAF uniform, and a black man. You couldn’t stand out more obviously than that.”* He was imprisoned in Stalag Luft III camp, east of Berlin, made famous by two prisoner escapes, engineered by tunnelling and later depicted in the movies *The Wooden Horse* (1950) and *The Great Escape* (1963).

After the war, Grant qualified as a barrister-at-law, but felt that racism in the legal profession denied him the opportunity to practise in Britain in the 1940s. So he went on to become an actor on stage and in film, as well as a singer and cabaret artist. He was the first West Indian to be seen regularly on British Television, singing the daily news on BBC’s *Tonight* programme in the 1950s. He also sang ‘Feeling Good’ for the first time on stage; a song that was later made famous by Nina Simone. He founded the first black arts centre.

*Unknown? Probably. Precious? I think so.* In recounting his wartime experience, Grant himself mused on the question: *“What would have happened if my parachute hadn’t opened?”*

Remembrance can, perhaps always should, ask awkward questions, as does W H Auden’s ‘Epitaph for the Unknown Soldier’: *“To save your world you asked this man to die: Would this man, could he see you now, ask why?”* What would those who died prematurely have wanted to do? How do we value the opportunities that they gave up? Remembrance’s

annual question: How do we live with the days given to us?

In the Gospel, via the *ready or not, here I come*, bridesmaids’ tale, Jesus delivers the punchline: *“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”* (Matthew 23:13) It is a reminder that we have all the time in the world – nothing more and nothing less. Wonderful possibility, but sands of time, too. The opportunity to mend a friendship or forgive a debt, to cherish a loved one or take a chance, to re-examine a prejudice, or let go a bitterness, to break a habit, to confront an injustice, to sing in faith and pray in depth – these beautiful, fundamental things will not always be there. Both the gospel and Remembrance warn us: Do not presume that tomorrow belongs to us. People of faith, or not, they urge us to do the right thing, the necessary thing, the sacred thing, the Christ-like thing, *now*.

On this unimagined Remembrance weekend our Armed Forces are currently deployed on pandemic duties. (I was told that the news of being billeted temporarily in a Liverpool holiday camp was greeted with the absolutely characteristic humour of the serving soldier: *“I’d rather go to Afghanistan than Pontins!”*) At a time when the world is restless and fearful in the face of so many unknowns, I finish with words from the wartime diary of Myles Hildyard, a veteran of Crete, North Africa, Italy and Normandy, written in 1942 [It Is Bliss Here: Letters Home 1939-45]:

*“War is like a fever; a violent disease which has to run its course. Physicians can prescribe, nurses watch and toil, and in their devoted ceaseless labours future life and death may, and does, depend.*

*But nothing they can do can alter the violence of the disease, its fluctuations, its recurring crises. They have to be borne patiently and treated as they arise. Anxiety on the part of onlookers when things go wrong – as go wrong they will – can do no good; in certain circumstances it can do great harm. The only proper course is to do all we humanely can, and remain calm and cheerful. This is the proper course (for fever) and also in war.”*

Keep awake therefore, for though we know neither the day nor the hour, let us live as *known, and precious*, in the sight of our loving God and Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Amen

# ‘Tis winter now

by Jim Blackwood

“‘Tis winter now; the fallen snow  
has left the heavens all coldly  
clear;  
through leafless boughs the sharp  
winds blow,  
and all the earth lies dead and  
drear.”

These are the opening lines of a poem by Samuel Longfellow, a 19th century American Unitarian minister who compiled several hymn books, as well as poetry and books on theology. He was the brother of the more celebrated poet Henry Longfellow, of ‘Hiawatha’ fame. You may be familiar with it as hymn 234 in the Church of Scotland Hymnary, sung to the old Scottish tune ‘O Waly Waly’.

In a year as challenging as 2020 many people are understandably not looking forward to winter with its long dark nights, its inclement weather, its overcast greyness. When talking about the seasons people mention the optimism of spring with joyful primroses and birdsong and new born lambs; the zenith of summer with sunshine, holidays and long bright daylight evenings; the abundance of autumn with nature’s harvest, freshness of air after summer’s heat, and glorious autumn colours. Not many praise winter as their favourite season. As Longfellow says, “the earth lies dead and drear”. But is it so dead? Is it really so drear?

The hymn continues, “And yet God’s love is not withdrawn...” Despite the more obvious drawbacks of winter, we can enjoy it as much as the other seasons by looking for that love. One way to do that is through nature. Winter provides us with unique wintery gifts in contrast to the other seasons. It is now recognised how important the natural world is to our wellbeing; spending time in natural environments benefits one’s physical and mental health.



*Alder in the orange evening light, Castle Semple, Lochwinnoch  
Photo Jim Blackwood*

It certainly lifts the spirits. Nature in winter, the greyest and darkest season, is therefore all the more important to us.

London counter-intuitively is a super place for nature. Don’t be put off by its overwhelming urban-ness. Think of all those wonderful open spaces like Wimbledon Common and Richmond Park, private gardens, allotments and squares, street trees, parks and the Thames. Even window boxes and roof gardens have value. In recent years green-winged orchids have colonised central London living rooves, to the great excitement of city based

botanists. En masse all those window boxes amount to many acres of flowers for pollinators. Googling how much ground is covered by London gardens reveals it’s a whopping 24% of Greater London, some 38,000 hectares. Gardens are richer for nature than much of our barren farmland devoted to intensive monoculture and soaked in chemicals. In total more than 40% of London is green space or open water, so there is plenty to see in London, not least in winter, if only one looks.

I’ve been a member of the London Natural History Society for over 30

## 'Tis winter now

continued

years, and throughout that time I've been amazed at what London naturalists have found locally. The society covers a 30 mile radius with St Paul's Cathedral as the centre. As many as 2,000 species of flowering plant have been found growing in the area; the tidal Thames supports 120 species of fish; over 60 species of bird nest in central London; LNHS members have recorded 47 species of butterfly, 1,173 moths and more than 270 kinds of spider around London. London's wetland areas support nationally important populations of many water birds. London has 38 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), two National Nature Reserves and 76 Local Nature Reserves. Now that's pretty impressive! And for many of St Columba's congregation this natural richness is on your doorstep!

One of my most thrilling nature experiences was a winter London one. I was dismissing my class at the end of the day and a Mum whispered to me that dolphins had been sighted in the Thames at Strand-on-the-Green near Kew Bridge, a few minutes walk from the school. As soon as the last child had been collected I set off out to the

riverside with my student teacher who was no less excited than I. It was a fine early winter's afternoon, still feeling autumnal. The light was low; the river choppy, mid-tide, neither high nor low. We spotted a small group of familiar adults with their children and approached them. Both adults and children were animated. We found out that there were at least two dolphins. We scanned the open water. Nothing. "There's one!" called an adult. No, it was a trick of the light. "There's one!" another adult said. But no, it was the shadow of a wave. You've no idea the myriad permutations of waves and light on the surface of the river until you look intensely. "Dolphin!" called a child. Children have much sharper sight than we adults! And sure enough there they were, two dolphins just a few tens of metres away from us. An arched back here, a dark fin there. We were rewarded with tantalising glimpses. There were no David Attenborough moments. No dolphin leapt in slow motion from the water to snap a fleeing fish in its beak. Nor did a white-tailed sea eagle swoop down and thieve a silvery snack from the dolphins. But it didn't matter. We were thrilled. The dolphins were enigmatic. Now you see them; now

you don't. And that somehow made the experience all the sweeter. It was on our patch where we lived and worked and learned. We didn't need a boat trip west of Jura. We didn't need a Ngorongoro safari.

I don't recall the species of dolphin. I'm not sure we ever knew. They made it onto the London evening news and local websites. It was a thrilling nature event in winter in London that touched so many local people. We chatted about the dolphins in class the next day. The excitement was still palpable. Nature in winter had enhanced our lives.

Of course one doesn't see dolphins every day. But there are plenty of other wintery gifts which nature provides without so much luck or effort needed. Go for a walk on a winter's day and allow your senses to do their thing. Walking by the loch here in Renfrewshire on a winter's day the chill in the air marks the season. Your breath condenses in glistening droplets on your woolly scarf, your nose and cheeks tingle, the air tastes of winter, a coolness in the throat. The low winter light of a frosty clear day has an orange glow that no other season offers. It paints the bark of alder trees in its orangeness, inviting you to take off your gloves and feel the bark, touch, connect with the tree. Leafless branches are festooned by intricate lichens. Flocks of finches and titmice cheerily chirrup, comfortably gregarious in search of food. The whoop whoop whoop of whooper swans resonates over the loch, the yellow and black of their beaks as bright as liquorice allsorts. A buzzard soars on high and if you're lucky lands nearby having spied some carrion. Fieldfares and redwings pluck the haws and rowan berries. Dead and drear this winter need not be.



*Buzzard in the snow*  
Photo Zul Bhatia

# Christmas Crackers

by Jean Stevenson

I understand that the most popular books this year for Christmas presents are likely to be two autobiographies, one by Arsene Wenger, *My Life in Red and White* and the other by Phillip Schofield, *Life is What You Make It*. Depending on your perspective you may be sorry or relieved that I am not about to give my views about either book or their authors. All I would say is that they may be popular in some households, but not in ours. As I have indicated before in similar articles that I have written over the years, I have a reasonably eclectic taste and whilst some of my choices may be predictable, not all of them are and you may find amongst my suggestions something that tickles your fancy or is an appropriate gift for someone you love this Christmas. I am always conscious when recommending books not to lose half my readers by choosing books aimed specifically at 'wimin'.

High on my list of favourite books at the moment are *Olive Kitteridge* and the follow-up *Olive Again* by Elizabeth Strout. Both books are essentially a series of short stories but I think they are better described as episodes in the life of the eponymous heroine, although if you read them you will understand that I struggled with using that description of Olive – maybe protagonist is better. When I read *Olive Kitteridge* I was concerned that I shared too many of Olive's characteristics, which was worrying because she is far from a universally liked person within her family or in her community, but I still found her compelling, although annoying – the sort of person who if you could only give her behaviours a tweak here and there would be seen as a treasure. There are other fictional characters who spring to mind as eliciting the same sort of reaction although for different reasons – Emma Woodhouse and Linda Snell



are two – but in the real world there are many individuals who display the same combinations of kindness, brutal honesty, sensitivity and lack of tact. Olive is a retired schoolteacher who struggles to find herself no longer in control of the lives of those in her sphere of influence. I am waiting eagerly for the next series of stories to be written.

A novel which requires a bit more concentration is *How to be Both* by Ali Smith. This is definitely a novel of two interlinked halves but with a twist. Half the book is set in present day England and half in Renaissance Italy but the additional twist is that half the copies were printed with the present day story first, the other half with the Italian episode first. I don't think that was just a gimmick but a genuine

attempt to work out if it made a difference to the readers' reactions to the book. It is quite a challenging read and one that you need to think about as you go but I think it is worth the effort, especially if you know someone else who has read it and with whom you can discuss interpretations – maybe that makes it an ideal book club choice although you don't have to be in a book club to do that. Our daughter and I often read the same books within a few months of each other, sometimes by design but often coincidentally, and when she lived in the Congo and more recently whilst we have not been able to see her due to the current situation, I have found our discussions about recently read books a great comfort.

# Christmas Crackers

continued

A much easier read is one that was on the Sunday Times bestseller list for a good while – *Saving Missy* by Beth Morrey. As I write this I realise that maybe it has more in common with *Olive Kitteridge* than I initially appreciated. Another eponymous main character, this time one aged 79 who has lost or lost touch with her family and who is desperately lonely and doesn't know how she can go on. The title gives the game away; she does go on and finds that there is more to life than living in the past and the secret is community. At St Columba's we know that to be the case and we know how much the small interactions we normally have with people we don't really know on a Sunday morning can develop into meaningful friendships, and how much those interactions have been missed in the strange times we are now living through.

I understand that there are people who don't read novels and it seems often this is a question of principle – although I've never really understood what the principle is. For those readers, an obvious Christmas choice might be David Attenborough's *A Life on Our Planet* but I'd like to propose some different books for consideration. Neither book is newly published but each arguably covers topics which are bang up to date and

which should appeal to readers with such diverse areas of interest as history, biography, politics, philosophy, economics, geography, social anthropology, botany and ecology, with a travelogue thrown in for good measure. I make no apology for the fact you might need to keep your thinking caps handy as you read them – if that option is not available to you, there is always Arsene Wenger or Philip Schofield!

*One River* by Wade Davies was the winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction. It follows the journey of the author who in the 1970s decided to retrace the footsteps of his mentor Richard Evans Schultes who in the 1940s disappeared into the Northern Amazon area of Colombia in his search for hallucinogens and medicinal plants. Schultes travelled by dug-out canoe and lived with local tribes mapping rivers, collecting specimens and documenting what he learned about shamans. We learn about cannibalism, use of blow guns and about societies where everything is shared and meet amazing characters – one an indomitable English woman who travels to Bogota as a young bride in days before passports and many years later ends up running the Pension Inglesa there. In more troubled times she is asked to show

her papers, which she cannot do: in response to the question as to whether she was a foreigner she answers most indignantly: 'Don't be ridiculous, of course not – I'm British!'

My final choice is strangely relevant even though it is more than twenty years old. *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama was written after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and looks forward to the 21st Century and what it has in store for us. The central thesis, which is explored by looking at the arguments of philosophers over the centuries and landmark historical events, is that the world is moving inexorably from many different starting points to a system which Fukuyama terms 'liberal democracy'. It is an amazing tour de force which includes the role of Christianity in the development of democracy but also religious fundamentalism, politics, science, war and ethics. Perhaps a good way of summarising the book is in the words of Churchill: 'Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others' – but it is interesting to read it in the light of the populist movements we are now experiencing and to challenge ourselves to think of another system that could work in the long term for all societies.

Happy reading.

## And keeping it in the family...

To mark her 90th birthday, St Columba's elder Jean Macpherson has updated the original 2010 publication *A Macpherson family from Badenoch*. Her new book, *Cousins: the next Generation* describes the family's remarkable and often highly amusing adventures and achievements across the world from the 18th century onwards, in commerce, farming, academia, law, sport and war. There are many

stories from Gaelic speaking times in Badenoch up to the present day and from the Macphersons' long-standing support for the Clan Gathering and local shinty.

*Cousins: the next Generation* is a hardback book of more than 350 pages, lavishly illustrated with photographs, maps and graphics. Inside the back cover is a CD of the Macpherson family tree from the

mid-18th century up to the present time, with over 300 Macphersons from across the world. The CD also contains the text itself and a selection of local photographs.

The book and CD costs £21.99 and will be available to purchase through the Church bookstall when it is back in operation.

# Baptisms • Marriages • Deaths

## MARRIAGES

*"Except the Lord build the house they labour in vain that build it"*

24th October      **Edward Charles William Robson to  
Katerina Louise Lockett, Bristol BS5**

## DEATHS

*"Blessed are they that die in the Lord"*

October            **Diana Kennington, London SW19  
Anne Woodall, Marlow, SL7  
Elizabeth Fergusson, London, SW13**



*We were very proud to see St Columba's member Ian Aitchison, 96, marching at the Cenotaph service on Remembrance Sunday with other selected servicemen and women.*

## IT'S TIME TO RENEW YOUR MAGAZINE SUBSCRIPTION

For information,  
please contact the Church Office

**St Columba's Church Office, Pont Street, London SW1X 0BD**

# Church Diary:

## 6<sup>th</sup> December 2020 to 7<sup>th</sup> February 2021

At the time of publishing, we are unable to have a congregation in the Church because of government restrictions. These restrictions are due to be lifted on 3rd December 2020 but plans may change. Please keep your eye on the website or call the office if you have any queries about attendance at the church after the 3rd December. All services listed will be live streamed on our website [www.stcolumbas.org.uk/livestream](http://www.stcolumbas.org.uk/livestream).

<b>6th December</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Morning Service</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>13th December</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Morning Service</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>20th December</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>A Service of Lessons and Carols</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>24th December</b>	<b>6.00pm</b>	<b>Watchnight Service</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>25th December</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Family Service</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>27th December</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Morning Service</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>3rd January</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Morning Service for Epiphany</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>10th January</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Morning Service</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>17th January</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Morning Service</b> Guest Preacher. Minister at St Andrew's, Newcastle
<b>24th January</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Holy Communion</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>31st January</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Morning Service</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD
<b>7th February</b>	<b>11.00am</b>	<b>Morning Service</b> Revd Angus MacLeod MA BD

# Prayer

## An Advent Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
your world awaits you.*

*In the longing of the persecuted for justice;  
in the longing of the poor for prosperity;  
in the longing of the privileged  
for riches greater than wealth;  
in the longing of our hearts for a better life;  
and in the song of your Church:  
expectation is ever present.*

*O come, Lord, desire behind our greatest needs.*

*O come, Lord, liberator of humanity.*

*O come, Lord, O come, Immanuel. Amen.*

*(Common Order)*

## A Blessing

*May my mind come alive today  
to the invisible geography  
that invites me to new frontiers,  
to break the dead shell of yesterdays,  
to risk being disturbed and changed.*

*May I have the courage today  
to live the life that I would love,  
to postpone my dream no longer,  
but to do at last what I came here for  
and waste my heart on fear no more.  
(Benedictus, John O'Donohue)*

If undelivered please return to sender:  
**St Columba's Church of Scotland**  
**Pont Street**  
**London SW1X 0BD**