

CORNERSTONE

The Magazine of
WITNEY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH



Christ Jesus is the chief cornerstone.

In Him the whole fabric is bound together, as it grows into a temple,
dedicated to the Lord (Ephesians 2:21)

February & March 2022

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This is the first edition written this year as the last one covered December 2021 and January 2022; As I look back over the last 12 months, I don't think anyone would have imagined what a profound impact COVID would have on our lives. Since the new variant, Omicron, sadly more people have been affected but it is not as severe and because we managed to get a vaccination established very quickly the UK seem to be better equipped to cope due to the high uptake of the vaccines, but sadly we still have people who do not wish to be vaccinated.

Once again, I hope this edition of the magazine will remind you that you are not forgotten by God, and that as Christians, we are praying for you at this difficult time.

So, on that note, I now turn to some of this month's contents: Pat Brent gives an update from Starfish Malawi; Lesley Barter, once again, gives us the Deacon's Letter; there is the continuation of Ken Lee's Bible Study; Pip Cartwright gives us the growth of WCC; David Kinchin gives a reflection on recent events and some articles have been extracted from Parish Pump, to name but a few

Many thanks for those who have contributed for this edition, but would encourage anyone to consider submitting article(s) for the next edition by either:

E-mail: terrypowlesland@uwclub.net

jacquipowlesland@uwclub.net

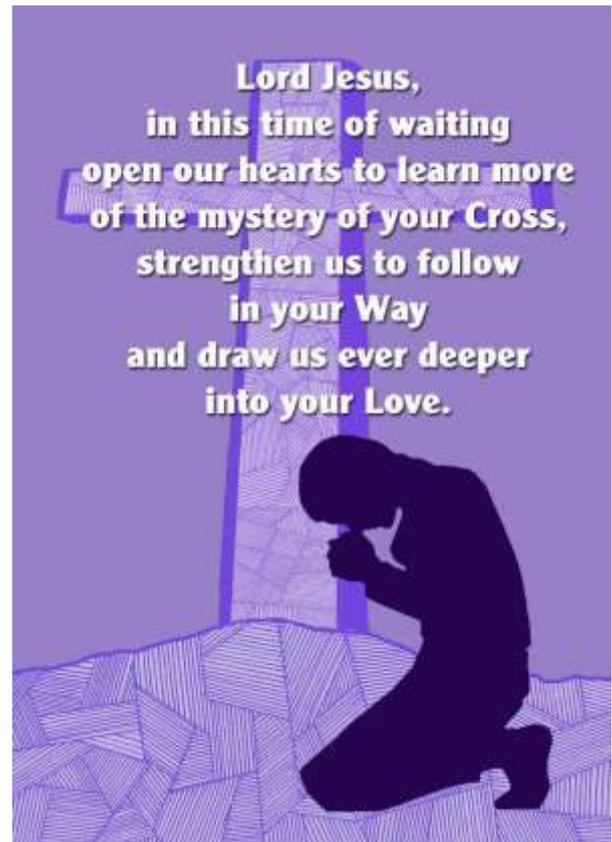
or, just plainly written on paper, which can be typed up

The next 2-monthly edition, covering April & May is due on **Sunday 3rd April**

Your Editor

Looking

In Swansea there used to be a well-known firm of solicitors called W G Christian and Sons. A letter sent to them from overseas was addressed simply: W. G. Christian, South Wales. It eventually arrived at their office with a note from the Post Office attached. It read: "No Christians in Cardiff – try Swansea."



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February & March Diary

Feb

6 th	am	Rev Michael Rolton	
	pm	Rev Elaine Kinchin	Communion
13 th	am	Rev Judi Holloway	
20 th	am	Rev Suzanne Nockels	Communion
27 th	am	Emma Worrall – Open Doors	

March

6 th	am	Rev Elaine Kinchin	
	pm	Nanna Blackman	Communion
13 th	am	John Baigent	
20 th	am	Rev Judi Holloway	Communion
27 th	am	Leprosy Mission	

April

3 rd	am	Rev Elaine Kinchin	
	pm	David Kinchin	Communion
10 th	am	Rev Dr Nick Pike	

The following events are given for your particular attention:

Feb

9/16/23	Zoom Bible Reflection	6.30pm for approximately 30 minutes
26 th	Witney Book Circle	10.30am

Mar

2/9/16/23/30	Zoom Bible Reflection	6.30pm for approximately 30 minutes
1 st	Lite Bite piece of the Word	12.15pm
4 th	World Day of Prayer	10.30am Our Lady & St Hugh
26 th	Witney Book Circle	10.30am

April

5 th	Lite Bite piece of the Word	12.15pm
6 th	Zoom Bible Reflection	6.30pm for approximately 30 minutes

Rotas

WELCOMING TEAM

Feb	06	Pat Smith
	13	Joan Currie
	20	Janet Hayes
	27	Pat Brent
March	06	Jacqui
	13	Beryl
	20	Pat Smith
	27	Joan Currie
April	03	Janet Hayes
	10	Pat Brent



FLOWERS

Feb	06	Beryl Cartwright
	13	Rita Hayes
	20	Pat Brent
	27	Joan Currie



March 06 Janet Hayes
 13 Jacqui Powlesland
 20 Judi Holloway
 27 Mothering Sunday
April 03 Beryl Cartwright
 10 Rita Hayes



SUNDAY COFFEE

Feb 06 Elaine Kinchin & Clare Ellis
 13 Pat Smith & Pat Brent
 20 Jacqui & Terry Powlesland
 27 Sue Birdseye & Claire Woodward
March 06 Pat Smith & Pat Brent
 13 Elaine Kinchin & Clare Ellis
 20 Sue Birdseye & Claire Woodward
 27 Jacqui & Terry Powlesland
April 03 Pat Smith & Pat Brent
 10 Elaine Kinchin & Clare Ellis



THURSDAY COFFEE

Feb 03 Pat Smith
 10 Judi Holloway & Jean Hodgson
 17 Beryl Cartwright
 24 Pat Smith
March 03 Judi Holloway & Jean Hodgson
 10 Beryl Cartwright
 17 Judi Holloway & Jean Hodgson
 24 Pat Smith
April 07 Beryl Cartwright
 14 Judi Holloway & Jean Hodgson



We would be extremely grateful for other people to join

SOUND SYSTEM

Feb 06 Terry Powlesland
 13 Nanna Blackman
 20 Terry
 27 Nanna
March 06 Terry
 13 Nanna
 20 Terry
 27 Nanna
April 03 Terry
 10 Nanna



For ALL the Rotas, every effort has been made to meet individual circumstances.
 However, if the dates are not convenient for you, please change with someone else

Feb 04 Elaine Beechey
 08 Pat Brent
 13 Judi Holloway
 16 Leah Cotton
 22 Dave Wesson
 24 Marian Kew



Mar 08 Joan Currie
 11 Lesley Barter
 19 Beryl Cartwright
 22 Peter Sellman
 28 Wendell La Fortune

Apr 04 Sarah Murrey

Deacon's Letter

Dear Friends

This is the time of year when many living creatures are hibernating. My cat is spending much more time than I do on my bed! It is part of God's grand plan for rejuvenation. Strength is being conserved so it can burst forth with vigour when Spring comes. Life may look as if it is on hold for the moment, but there is a lot more happening than we can see.

Underground plants are shooting. Bulbs are peeping through the soil. Embryonic buds are showing themselves on twigs and on warmer days smaller mammals appear for a brief forage. So, we should resist the temptation to go to ground until Spring comes.

This is a bleak time of year, but it is intended to give us space to think and plan. Hence we have decided to use it to think critically about our Church Vision and Mission. What kind of church do we want to be in order to meet the challenges of the post-Covid world? What is our Unique Selling Point? Is it feasible to dream of attracting young families, if to do so would mean changing the way that we worship and the priorities that we have previously set? Will this drive away the faithful friends that we have nurtured over the years? And is this service already covered by other churches locally? Where are the gaps in support that will bring people into Christ's support network? Do we need to make more effort to meet people where they are? Or do we concentrate on making our church a haven that attracts people in? If so, how can we get them across the portal?

None of these questions is new, but we have shied away from confronting them because they are difficult. Now we have a watershed moment that allows us to do some radical thinking. Let's grab the opportunity with both hands, take some risks and stop thinking about what we can't accomplish. You never know what you can do until you try....and if you do what you always did, you will get what you always got.

Nothing is impossible with God's help

This children's poem says it all:

*Winter creeps, nature sleeps
Birds are gone, flowers are none
Fields are bare, bleak the air
Leaves are shed, all seems dead.
God's alive! Grow and thrive
Hidden away, Bloom of May, Robe of June
Very soon
Naught but green will be seen!*

(Percy Dearmer 1867 – 1936)





PRAYER LETTER

No 201

Waiting

Waiting conjures up all sorts of questions and emotions depending on the situation.

Waiting for the Covid restrictions to be completely lifted would be a relief after two years of anxiety.

Waiting for a Special Event e.g.; Birthday, Anniversary, Celebration we await with eager anticipation looking forward to the occasion.

Waiting at a bus stop or railway station to make a journey may make us feel anxious anticipating if the bus or train will arrive on time, be delayed or even be cancelled.

After years of slavery in Egypt the Israelites were waiting to be 'delivered' by God from their plight. How many years had they been waiting for God to act? Even when God had called Moses to be their Leader to lead them out of Egypt (**The Exodus**) into the Promised Land, it took them another 40 years wandering and complaining in the desert to reach the Promised Land. Moses died just before the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land. Moses had fulfilled God's command. Hundreds of years later when the Israelites were exiled in Babylon they had to rely on God's servant Daniel and his witness to the Jewish Faith for the Israelites to be released and returned to Israel.

During these 'waiting times' individuals and nations had recognised and heard God's word, listened and responded.

After two years we as a Nation and the rest of the world are waiting for the end of the Pandemic.

After more than two years we are waiting for a new Minister.

Life goes on during these waiting periods. Do we really understand the phrase 'long overdue' in the scale of things!

During the Lockdown Key Workers worked throughout and others were able to work from home. During the Lockdown we as a Church Fellowship with the help of our savvy technicians, we were able to have our Church Services and Bible Study on ZOOM or join other Services which were streamed.

Now we are able to worship in person and still participate on Zoom or online Bible Studies.

Calling a new Minister is proving to be a long process but it is in God's time that is important not our own time. Christians throughout the centuries have met together in groups with or without leaders. Some have met in hiding due to persecution or other groups not recognised or registered with the authorities are able to worship. In 1662 when the Non-Conformists (our Christian Ancestors) were ejected from St Mary's Church in Witney, they found a 'welcome hiding place' to Worship at St Mary's Church, Cogges.

Give thanks that today, Christians in the UK are free to worship God in a registered building or any other place.

It would certainly help our Church Fellowship if we called another Minister soon but our timing is not God's timing. May God help us during this continuous Interregnum and guide us to recognise any signs or symbols He sends via the Holy Spirit in the process of advertising and appointing a new Minister. Keep praying for The Diaconate and the rest of the Fellowship to work together and have patience as we **wait** during this challenging time.

Every Blessing,

Beryl

Please note that for up-to-date prayer requests contact Beryl (703717)

The following article has been written and submitted by David Kinchin, and is entitled:

A reflection on recent events

Well what a month January 2022 has been. I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. On the 24th of the month I officially became an O.A.P having had to wait an extra year for this honour. So at the ripe old age of 66 I can relax and enjoy the fruits of my labours.

Except I can't. It just is not in my nature. I have two and a half years still to serve as your Church Treasurer (the present Constitution prevents me from standing again), I have either four years or nine years to serve as a magistrate. This depends on a proposed law change to raise the retirement from the bench to the age of 75 years. I also have my role as Chairman to Witney Buttercross Scout Group – and there is no retirement in sight on that.

So Church, Court, and Scouts aside, my time is my own. Wait. I forgot to mention Elaine, my long-suffering wife. She has forbidden me from retiring from my chores around the house! I guess I can live with that.

So what will I do with the free time I have found? The plan originally was to travel around but then Covid19 reared up, which means that for the time being anyway, our plans will have to be moderated and our travel somewhat limited.

Nevertheless, I still plan to spend our children's inheritance whenever and wherever possible. Please don't tell them.

Then today I noticed something on the wall of our new favourite coffee shop in the town. It is a quote from Helen Keller.

“The best and the most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched.

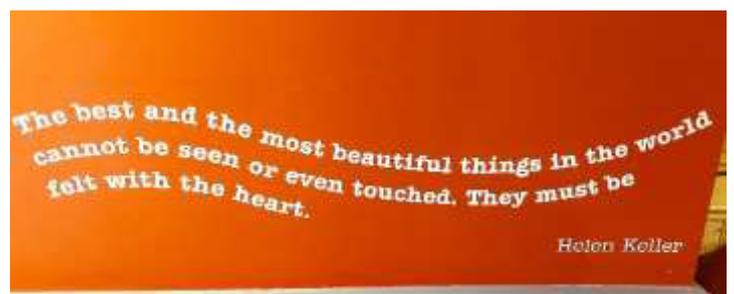
They must be felt with the heart.”

Maybe what I had planned for my retirement is not what God has planned for me. My heart is telling me that I really enjoy scouts, and court and the church (not necessarily in that order). So maybe I need to devote more time to these activities and fit in any retirement activities around these rather than fitting these around my retirement! Maybe.

Helen Keller was blind. She was born in Alabama in 1880 and died in 1968. She was famed for her writing, for her disability rights advocacy and for her loss of sight and hearing at the age of just nineteen months. She was an inspiration both in her lifetime and after her death. Indeed, one of her best-known books is entitled “Optimism”. Optimism does not rest on the absence of evil but on the preponderance of good and willing effort - it is a mindset.

With optimism and faith what can possibly go wrong? With optimism and faith I think we can all move forward as a fellowship. We need to feel that fellowship in our hearts.

Every Blessing – [David Kinchin JP., B.Ed., OAP](#)



The following article, written & submitted by Pip Cartwright, was correct when first published in July 2006, and is a continuation from the last edition, and is entitled:

History of WCC 1968-1969

Dr Peter Johnson continued as our Student Pastor up until July 1968.

Having attained his Theology Degree he departed at the end of the College year and moved to a Church in Dewsbury (I believe) and a few years later he was called to serve in the United Church of South India. As a parting gift he gave the Church a small wooden cross for the Communion Table.

From a personal point of view, early 1968 was quite traumatic. Our youngest child Stephen, who was born in December 1967, was taken seriously ill in 1968. Having had a serious internal operation he was returned home, only to be rushed back into the Churchill Hospital and was on the Critical List for a number of weeks. As we feared for his life, Dr Peter Johnson baptised Stephen in the Churchill Hospital, Oxford. Thankfully, Stephen recovered and one of Peter Johnson's last services in June was Stephen's Dedication Service in our High Street Church.

During this same month Beryl and I had our memberships transferred from Dartford Congregational Church and Abington Avenue Congregational Church Northampton to the Witney Church.

Following Dr Peter Johnson's departure, Graham Stephenson agreed to act as Student Pastor for three months from July to September 1968. Concerned with the future of our Church, the Moderator suggested the possibility of a link with another local Church. It was at this time that the Congregational Union of England and Wales was proposing a basis for Union with the Presbyterian Church.

During the Summer, contact was made with the Rev. Clementina Gordon, late of Wivenhoe Congregational Church Essex. It seemed that she was moving to Oxford for four years to do further Theological studies. She was asked to consider having the oversight of the Church and live in the Manse. Miss Gordon was invited and she accepted, despite the Church not being strong enough to pay a full stipend. Although the Roll numbered 42, some of those members were not active and it appears that only 29 actually supported the Church. The problem was that the Church, and especially the Manse, desperately wanted money spending on them.

In 1969 two developers put in offers for the High Street site. I believe one offered £3,000 per annum as Ground Rent on a 99 year lease and, another, suggested developing the Ground Floor with a Church built over the top (at a cost of £30,000). If I remember correctly some Deacons visited a similar development elsewhere to evaluate the possibilities. Other options were considered, one being that we should approach Davenport Road Methodist Church, who had a more modern Church building, but no Minister, whilst we had a Minister, but possibly no building in the near future. Church unity was in the air and the Moderator even suggested we join up with Faringdon and Cumnor Churches and share the Minister. None of these options were considered to be preferable and the Church Meeting was divided over the possible Davenport Road merger, even assuming that Davenport Road Methodist would be in agreement.

The Deacons had a meeting with Mr Wheldon Wright. At that meeting he was asked what would happen to the money if the site was sold. It seemed he advised them that the Church had to keep together or lose the money. If the Church "faded

out” the money from this sale could be used by the Congregational Union for needy Churches elsewhere.

Of course, Miss Gordon had her own agenda and, as she had come to the area to study, I can imagine that she was apprehensive over the demands that all these options would make on her time and energy. Luckily, for Witney Congregational Church, the Rev. Gordon came from a business background (her family was involved in Banking) and her opinions and advice were to prove invaluable. Watch this space...

The following article has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

Christians in India face growing number of attacks

In India, attacks against Christians have been rising, and more states are imposing anti-conversion laws. This comes as growing numbers of the Indian underclass, the Dalits, are turning to Christianity, and as right-wing Hindu nationalism is on the rise.

As yet another state, Karnataka, is poised to impose anti-conversion legislation, there have been challenges in the Supreme Court to the constitutionality of limiting freedom of religion in India.

Late last year, Hindu nationalists set upon a Christian community in Chhattisgarh state, to drive them out and make the area ‘Christian free’, according to International Christian Concern (ICC).

The mob of 50 attacked Christians in Metapal village with clubs, breaking their bones and leaving nine Christians seriously injured.

And following a similar attack on Christians in Uttar Pradesh, when 100 Hindu nationalists burst into a church meeting, beating the pastor and other Christians. The police turned up soon after and arrested the Christians, later charging them under the anti-conversion law.

The latest report from a coalition of NGOs listed more than 300 violent attacks against Christians in India, over a nine-month period. They included 288 accounts of mob violence, across 21 states.

The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) also recorded 145 incidents of religious persecution against Christians – including three murders – in the first six months of 2021.

According to one Christian in India: “The number of attacks has increased since the second wave of COVID-19 ended. This is a most challenging time for the Church in India. We need prayer and the intervention of God.”

An Indian pastor said that extremists were resorting to violence because growing numbers of Hindus were putting their faith in Christ and attending church services.

Late last year three extremists on a motorcycle threw acid over a 14-year-old Christian boy. Nitish Kumar was burned across 65 per cent of his body, and later died.

His 17-year-old brother, Sanjeet, told Morning Star News: “Even after what my brother has gone through, we will not forsake Christ. We will continue to remain faithful until we die.”

The rising persecution is linked to Hindutva, a form of religious and cultural nationalism that binds Hindu identity to nationality. Hindutva (literally Hinduness) shapes the right-wing political ideology of India’s ruling BJP and other nationalist groups. At its most extreme, the notion

behind Hindutva is that to be Indian is to be a Hindu – and nothing else will be tolerated.

The rising tide of intolerance has increased since the election of the nationalist BJP in 2014. It has resulted in attacks against religious minorities and the passing of anti-conversion laws in many states. These laws are targeted at both Muslims and Christians.

According to the 2021 Indian census there are around 960 million Hindus in India, which has a population of 1.3 billion. Estimates vary as to the number of Christians. The official figure is 29 million, but some observers put the number at almost 65 million, roughly 5 per cent of the population.

Release International is working to train pastors in India and to provide financial and medical help when they come under attack. If you would like to support them, please visit:

<https://releaseinternational.org>

Five famous quotes from Desmond Tutu

The recent death of Archbishop Desmond Tutu was mourned around the world. Here are five of his more famous quotes, which show why he was so especially honoured for his justice and reconciliation work in South Africa.

“Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

“Don't raise your voice, improve your argument. Good sense does not always lie with the loudest shouters, nor can we say that a large, unruly crowd is always the best arbiter of what is right.”

“Forgiving is not forgetting; it's actually remembering - remembering and not using your right to hit back. It's a second chance for a new beginning. And the remembering part is particularly important. Especially if you don't want to repeat what happened.”

“Differences are not intended to separate, to alienate. We are different precisely in order to realise our need of one another.”

Christians in England and Wales now less than 51 per cent

The number of Christians in England and Wales has fallen to 51 per cent of the population, from the 59 per cent recorded in the 2011 Census.

The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics have revealed just over half the population in England and Wales described their religion as Christian in 2019.

This coincides with an increase in the number of those not adhering to any religion, which has grown from 32.3 per cent in 2011 to 38.4 per cent now.

Of those with no religion, 53 per cent are aged between 20 to 29-years-olds followed by those aged between 30 to 39-year-olds with 46 per cent.

Young adults are therefore the smallest proportion of Christians, with only 35 per cent of 20 to 29-year-olds adhering to Christianity as their religion.

This compared to 60 per cent of 60 to 69-year-olds, 74 per cent of 70 to 79-year-

olds, and 81 per cent of those aged 80 and over.

Although the results of the 2021 Census are due to be published, the Office for National Statistics has revealed data showing that "no religion" was the second most common response in 2019.

Reacting to the figures, Dave Male, the Church of England's director of evangelism and discipleship told the Telegraph: "It's encouraging that in an age where people are less likely to [class] themselves as 'Christian', more than half the population still do.

"We know from research that there is a willingness among younger generations to engage with faith and, for people of all ages, the need for meaning and answers in life hasn't stopped."

Knit and Natter Group

This group meets on a Thursday morning 10-12am. at the same time as the craft and banner groups.

We are knitting first size baby hats for the maternity unit at JR in any colours except pink or blue. They give out about 80 a month so need a constant supply.

Any hats we get that we can't send to JR go to the Witney Baby Bank, who will also take 1st. size cardigans. This is a local charity supported by our lady Mayor.

We are also knitting oblongs for blankets for children in Malawi, as it gets cold at night.

We are using d/k wool size 8 needles with 50 sts wide (9") and 7ins. long. Any colours and stocking stitch.

If you knit but can't come for the natter you can still join in and bring things to Church and label for Pat or Judi.

Bible Study

In this edition, and with permission from Ken & Marjorie Lee's family, and in memoriam to Rev Ken Lee, a series of Bible Studies, written by Ken and first submitted back in 1999, will be re-produced and is entitled:

MEANDERING IN MARK

"Meander" means "To wander deviously or aimlessly". Perchance this is not too accurate a description of these studies; it is hoped that they are not too devious nor totally aimless. However, the term "meander" is used to indicate an approach which takes its time, stops as needful to let a thought, an idea, an insight develop - all with the purpose of seeing what the Lord has to say to his people. May He speak, and to Him be the glory.

21. Mark 8:11-30

Once more in Mark's story the Pharisees make an appearance seeking Jesus and "began to argue with him." Perhaps the meaning would be better conveyed by such words as "began to question him, to discuss with him." It seems that these Pharisees were trying to get at the truth concerning Jesus, to come to a satisfactory conclusion in their own minds as to who he was, as to whether his teaching should be taken seriously, to test out the reality of any claims he might make. So they did what seemed to them a perfectly sensible thing, they asked him for a sign from heaven. In line with the teaching in Deuteronomy 18:20-22 they sought for actual proof of the genuineness of the "prophet". Yet surely the sign that they were seeking had already been given again and again in the events of Jesus' ministry up to that time! There were signs a-plenty if they were prepared to see them. Like many people both before them and since they either could not or would not see.

Jesus, so Mark records, sighed deeply in his spirit. It is almost as if there is a touch of despair at the obstinate blindness of these Pharisees as Jesus asks them, "Why does this generation ask for a sign?" The term "this generation" has echoes of Old Testament stories of failure and faithlessness such as when Noah was said to be the only one righteous in "this generation" (Gen.7:1) and Moses speaks of a "perverse and crooked generation" in his valedictory song (Deut. 32:5) while the Psalmist in Psalm 95:10 pictures God as loathing "that generation" for forty years as a people whose heart goes astray. Again and again God's signs were given but "this generation" either refused to see them, or to recognise them - and they always wanted more. Jesus will not grant the Pharisees' wish. Mark records him as saying "Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." Yet, of course, there were signs all around, and there were to be yet more - the problem was not the lack of signs, but rather that "this generation" were so set in their own minds as to what God should do and would do that they were unable to see that which God presented before them. So, indeed, no sign was given to them for they would have discounted such a sign in the same way as they had already found the "signs" insufficient for them. Mark then records of Jesus - "And he left them." There is an awesome note of finality in those words; these Pharisees had failed to realise who this Jesus was - and he left them and, by boat, went across to the other side. The symbolism in these words is intense

So we find Jesus, together with his disciples, in a boat somewhere on the Sea of Galilee, heading towards "the other side". Are these disciples really with him in spirit, in understanding? Are they on the "same side" as he is? Jesus begins to probe them, to make them think in perhaps deeper ways than they have done

heretofore. Jesus grasps the opportunity presented when the disciples find that they are short of food supplies in the boat, they have only one loaf. He suddenly speaks to them, using a word variously rendered as "see, watch out, look, take good note of, be certain about this". That which he is to say is important for them to realise, to understand. And his words are words of warning; "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod" (or "the Herodians.") Yeast is one of those things which is very active, of which a very small amount has a very large effect - sometimes for good, sometimes for ill. Its presence is often difficult to detect until its effects have completely changed that substance into which it has become admixed. Jesus warns his disciples about letting in the "little bit", what we in our day might describe as "the thin end of the wedge", a wedge which can split a whole person or a community apart. "The yeast of the Pharisees" could well be that religious punctiliousness for detail which ultimately leads on to the ceremony being all and the people being nothing. And "the yeast of Herod" could well be that desire for status and power which ultimately justifies any action to achieve its end. These great evils begin with the letting in of such small alien things - "Look out" says Jesus, "beware!"

The disciples don't get what Jesus means. They remember his words so that Mark is eventually able to record them in his Gospel - but at the time they remain totally bewildered and start questioning among themselves as to whether Jesus is perhaps scolding them for having no bread.

Hearing them, Jesus moves them rapidly on from thoughts of bread to their need for understanding. In words which have echoes of the words to the prophet Isaiah at his call as to how the minds of the people will be dull, their ears stopped and their eyes shut (Isaiah 6) and of the words of both Jeremiah (Jer. 5:21) and Ezekiel

(Ezek. 12:2) concerning those who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear Jesus challenges them concerning their lack of understanding. Just what have they taken in from their time with him? Can they not remember what has happened, all the things he has said and done. In particular, when they think of bread, what of the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand - and especially of the abundance of leftovers. Did these things mean nothing to them? So he poses the question "Do you not yet understand?" They apparently gave no answer. No doubt as their journey across the sea continued this question nagged at them as they tried to come to terms with that greater nagging question as to whom the Jesus really was. The time was fast approaching when they must each answer that question for themselves.

So they come to Bethsaida. Earlier in Mark's account the disciples had set out to go to Bethsaida (6:45) but had apparently not arrived there on that occasion. Now however, when Jesus is with them they reach this place on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee, east of the river Jordan. Sometimes referred to as Bethsaida-Julias, it was located in the territory administered by Herod Philip who had resolved to found a new city there named in honour of Augustus Caesar's daughter Julia. Philip had previously built Caesarea Philippi on the ancient site of Panias close to one of the sources of the River Jordan. It seems possible that his Julias project never reached completion and was abandoned at a fairly early stage since little mention of it found in contemporary accounts and Mark refers to the place as being a village (vv. 23 & 26) and calls it Bethsaida. However its location can be regarded as significant in Mark's ongoing story, for the area from Bethsaida up to and around Casarea Philippi, while having a mainly Jewish population, particularly in the villages, had

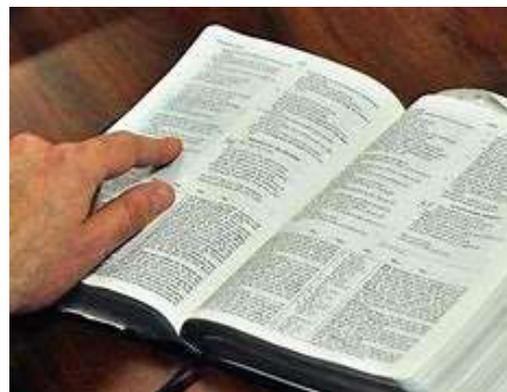
also a large Gentile population. In today's terms it would probably be described as a multi-cultural area. In the boat, Jesus had set the disciples thinking concerning the two feeding miracles and their understanding of him and his mission. What was that mission and to whom was it directed? The events which Mark is now to record are set outside the closed circle of Israel, among those dispersed among the Gentiles, among the Gentiles!

"Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him." Who the people were, who the blind man was, whether he was a Jew or a Gentile, Mark does not record. He was a blind man; his need was obvious. Those who brought him asked for him the touch of Jesus. They did not ask directly for healing, but simply for the loving concern of touch. Jesus responds immediately by taking the man's hand and leading him out of the village. There, away from buildings, away from people, Jesus applied saliva to the man's eyes as he also laid his hands upon him. The parallel with the healing of the deaf and dumb man in the Decapolis (7:32-36) is obvious although here the healing is not instantaneous. On being questioned by Jesus the man says that he now sees people as though they were trees walking. Something good is happening, but it is not complete. Jesus lays his hands directly upon the man's eyes. The man stares hard - and everything falls into place, he sees clearly. What are we meant to understand by the two-stage healing? Does it link with the disciples' lack of understanding, with their slow rate of learning, with the need for them (and us) to make an effort to move beyond the misty view of "men as trees walking"? Or does it perhaps say that when disciples don't get things quite right, Jesus touches them again? Progress may be slow but, while Jesus remains in the situation, the progress will continue until the good is

achieved. Jesus sends the healed man back home. Mark records Jesus as telling him not even to go into the village. Maybe this is because in the village he had "worked" as a beggar, but now at home he can work as a full man. The past is to be left behind for a new future beckons.

It is to this new future that Mark now directs his story as he comes to the event to which his whole Gospel has been leading right from his opening words declaring whom he believes (knows) Jesus to be. Jesus and his disciples travel on among the villages around Casarea Philippi. As they walk and no doubt talk together about many things, Jesus asks them: "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples come up with three answers which they have heard suggested by people. First is "John the Baptist." The second is "Elijah". The third is "one of the prophets." The common point of these three answers is that none of them expect anything new of God. Not now, at this precise time. All are looking back to things as they used to be. Possibly they represent the longing to the "good old days". Oh yes, the return of the days when God acted in special ways were what was desired. People would know how to cope with that - the sort of "Revival" that had happened before. Get that over and one might be ready for God to do a new thing - but not yet! The expectancy is of God acting, but of God acting as he has done before; in vain had the prophets repeatedly spoken of a God who would do a new thing, who would make people of new heart and mind (Isa. 42:9; 43:19; 48:6; Jer. 31:22; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26). Such was not the expectation of the people; they were looking for a repeat of that which had happened before. So Jesus asks the disciples the direct question: "Who do you say that I am?" Mark records their answer as coming immediately from Peter, acting as spokesman. We may wonder whether it

did come quite so directly. Was this answer something they had whispered one to another as they had wrestled with trying to understand the events in which they were caught up, the person with whom they had cast in their lot? And how did Peter now say those words: "You are the Messiah"? Were they firmly proclaimed with the certainty of solid faith, or were they whispered in longing hope? Or was it somewhere between? However it was, the words were at last uttered. The disciples had said that they had found God's Anointed, the One whom Israel had been waiting for through the ages, the person who was to save and renew God's people - they had found him in this man, Jesus of Nazareth. What did this mean for the days ahead? How was this Messiah going to achieve the purpose for which he came? No doubt they had their ideas - and yet almost all of those ideas were going to turn out to be wrong. Perchance this is why, having accepted without demur the title they give to him, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about him. They have found out who he is: others must find out for themselves. Meanwhile, he has much to tell not just the disciples but all who will listen, of what it truly means to be the Messiah. To the account of these things, Mark now moves on in the second half of his Gospel - the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.



The following article has been submitted by Pat Brent, and is entitled:

Starfish Malawi

I hope you have all read the Christmas Greeting, on the notice board by the Church door.

Highlights of 2021 : Hope Clinic was finished and opened, they have had 40,964 attendances since April.

One patient Elizabeth Moyo aged 87 had a stroke and was treated in Salima Hospital. This was too far for her to travel for regular treatment after her discharge, still unable to walk. After the opening of the Clinic she had regular physio treatment and can now walk again. She thanks God for answering her prayers and all the supporters for providing the facilities.

The Bible Explorers Team has been enlarged and now covers up to 52 schools in the surrounding area. Apparently this has resulted in more regular attendance, and behaviour improvement, they no longer fight each other so often!

The Michael Jackson Legacy Fund has provided money for a Special Education Needs Centre, which they hope will open in 2022. Disabled and children with learning difficulties have never had any specialist teaching before.

One of the most exciting things for the children was the opening of a new playground so they have somewhere safe to play. Consists mainly of old painted car tyres, swings and a sand pit!!



On the Starfish Malawi website there is a lovely letter from one of the students who was sponsored by Starfish supporters as a teenager through the High School in Salima. Thanking everyone as she has completed her teacher training and is going on to do Nursing and Midwifery course.

There are plans for a Maternity Wing at the Hope Clinic, to encourage mothers to have their babies under supervision not in the huts or in the bush.

The numbers of Covid cases is creeping up again but the virus seems to be introduced from outside not within the settlement. Only 2 people in the settlement have died from Covid but only 3-4% of the general population are vaccinated.

They ask that we continue to pray for doctors, teachers and staff of the schools and Clinic.

One of the things they would like is knitted blankets to keep the children warm as the nights get quite cold.



If you are interested in helping you could join the knit and natter group on a Thursday morning at Church. If you knit but don't natter you could help as well.

We are making oblongs of 50 sts approx 9 ins.wide on no. 8 needles by 7ins long.. On

no.9 needles add 5 sts. If you need any help you can ask one of the group or Pat Brent.

Please continue to hold Starfish in your hearts and your prayers. 🙏



lendwithcare

Witney Congregational Church's
impact on poverty

Lend With Care Figures.

309 Loans
£10,536.62 Lent
2240 Entrepreneurs helped
6791 Family members helped
659 Jobs created
9690 People helped

£2,905.91 Credit added
£8,471.90 Repaid
£602.15 Donated

In Short, we have contributed £602.15 towards the administration of our loans. The Church has loaned £2,905.91 to the organisation, and this has resulted in over

300 individual loans being made. In fact, £8,471.90 has been circulated via this scheme. In other words, our money has been loaned out three times over. Thank you everyone.

David Kinchin

The following article, written by Dr Peter Brierley, a church statistician, considers what 2022 may hold for us, and is entitled:

The World Ahead

Towards the end of every year *The Economist* publishes a comprehensive paperback looking at the year to come. For 2022, *The World Ahead* looks at 10 main issues, and while of course these reflect a commercial and financial viewpoint, they are also areas of concern to Christians also. They are:

- 1) *Democracy v autocracy* – the tensions between the rival political systems of America and China will continue to involve trade, tech regulations, vaccinations, and space stations.
- 2) *Pandemic to endemic* – new treatments are coming, but unless more people can be vaccinated globally, Covid-19 will become yet another endemic disease, affecting the poor more than the rich.
- 3) *Inflation worries* – the supply-chain interruptions and increased energy demands have pushed up prices. Will that affect charity and church finances? The UK also has an acute labour shortage.
- 4) *The future of work* – the work-from-home syndrome will probably mean more 'hybrid' workstations. Women are keener to work from home. Could this impact church life, and, if so, in what ways?
- 5) *The new techlash* – American and European governments have been trying to rein in the tech giants. Meanwhile, China is demanding they focus on geostrategic advantage, not "frivolities like games and shopping."
- 6) *Crypto grows up* – the new crypto-currencies are being domesticated. Where will the future

standard of finance fall? The central banks or somewhere else? It is still to be determined. Such issues may affect the Church Commissioners, but probably not the local church!

7) *Climate crunch* – this affects us all but still “a striking lack of urgency prevails among policymakers.” And global success, if it can be achieved, will require co-operation between the West and China.

8) *Travel trouble* – the transition to an endemic from a zero-Covid suppression (as in Australasia) may be difficult. Future business travel is likely to be much less (zoom taking over), so holiday travel could cost more. What will this mean for international Christian gatherings?

9) *Space races* – “2022 will be the first year in which more people go into space as paying passengers than government employees.” China will finish its new space station; NASA is crashing a probe into an asteroid.

10) *Political footballs* – the Beijing Winter Olympics and the football World Cup in Qatar will show just how far sport can bring nations together.

Such is the global perspective, as seen by economists. What difference would Christian leaders bring to the table? Church planting would be an obvious candidate, but there is also a need to encourage dispirited Christian people, to strengthen and empower youth work, to decide the best way forward for congregations whose churches are no longer viable, to develop a vision to meet national spiritual need, to enable leadership to focus on the top priorities without distraction on lesser things, and finally, to revitalise faith in the inspiration, authority and power of God’s Word.

World Watch List for 2022 names worst 50 countries

Afghanistan is now the worst country in the world for the extreme persecution of Christians.

So says Open Doors, which has recently released the 2022 World Watch List, its annual ranking of

the top 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution.

For 2022, Afghanistan comes top because the Taliban are back in control. North Korea now comes second, followed by Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Eritrea, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, and India in the top ten.

But the problem is worldwide. “At least 360 million Christians around the world experience high levels of persecution and discrimination,” says Open Doors. “That’s an astonishing one in seven of the global Christian population.

“Persecution of Christians has reached the highest levels since the Open Doors World Watch List began nearly 30 years ago.”

And Open Doors warns that the Taliban victory in Afghanistan has “bolstered Islamic militants in neighbouring Pakistan and may well embolden jihadist groups in other regions. The Taliban’s success encourages extremists around the world.”

Certainly, Christians across sub-Saharan Africa also face increasing violence from Islamic militants. In Nigeria, more Christians are killed for their faith than in the rest of the world combined. But they are also badly persecuted in Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Mali, Cameroon, and Burkina Faso.

Meanwhile, the global Church is increasingly a refugee church, because of the more than 84 million people around the world who have been forcibly displaced and are living as refugees in another country or displaced within their own country, many are Christians fleeing persecution.

Open Doors says, “Sadly, life on the move or in refugee camps is even more fragile, with discrimination, extortion, human trafficking and sexual violence. A displaced church is a vulnerable church.”

Open Doors partners work with refugees in many countries, providing vital aid, shelter and fellowship to Christians in need. If you would like to help them, or learn more about the World Watch List, visit: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org>

