

December Letter from Fr. Marcus

My Dear Friends,

Let me begin by sending you all the Blessings of this Holy Season of Advent, and then Christmas. It is a time when churches throughout our land are in the forefront of such a great deal of community thought and activity, and we do well to ensure that the true meaning of Christmas is proclaimed loud and clear.

May I ask every one of you to invite a friend, neighbour or relative to join us for one of our Christmas services, and perhaps together we can express the enormity of the love of God in Christ Jesus. Sometimes the world can seem rather a tough place, and for many people life can be grim. But the Christian faith is all about love.

The glorious story of Christmas reminds us that we are loved so much by God, that he came to be among us. Jesus shows us the nature of God, and teaches us that our response is to love God and neighbour.

Christmas is also the time when it is easy for us to remind family members and friends how much they mean to us. It is an opportunity to rekindle friendships, initiate relationships and resolve family or community conflicts or issues. All this can be done because we are celebrating the coming of the Prince of Peace. We can't celebrate him with tension and bitterness in our hearts.

In this letter I want to continue with our Stewardship theme, and speak a little about building on what we have, and who we are. We are truly blessed in our church by being a community of faithful people who gather together regularly to worship God. That is our primary function as Christians, and I genuinely believe that we should endeavour to put our heart and soul into our worship, so much so that we 'Get lost in Wonder, Love and Praise'.

Worship is about giving; about offering to God. It is a sacrifice of praise during which we give of ourselves to glorify our creator.

'The Eucharist is the Great Thanksgiving, which always includes both word and sacrament. It is a proclamation and a celebration of the work of God. It is the Great Thanksgiving to the Father for everything accomplished in creation, redemption and sanctification, for everything accomplished by God now in the Church and in the world in spite of the sins of human beings, for everything that God will accomplish in bringing the Kingdom to fulfilment. Thus the Eucharist is the benediction by which the Church expresses its thankfulness for all God's benefits'.

(From the Lima Text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry published by the Faith and Order Committee of the World Council of Churches)

I quote the above just as a reminder of the enormity of what it is that we are doing when we gather in church. It is so much about God. Each time we worship we are giving thanks for 'Everything accomplished in Creation ... and everything God will accomplish!' This is BIG STUFF.

With this in mind I hope we can put into perspective our own personal thoughts about both what we put into our worship and what we believe we get out of it.

At the beginning of the year we began an experiment with different times for our services in Woolbeding and Midhurst. This was in response to comments and questions made by members of both churches particularly around the time of the changing of the clocks and Remembrance Day last year. We explored the options at PCC level and decided to try for a year to move the 8am service to 9am, and the 10am to 10.30 at Midhurst, leaving Sunday Morning Live! as it was at 9.30.

The reasoning behind this was to help those who had to get to church (particularly Woolbeding) in time to light candles and prepare for the service. Also, some of our older members, who prefer the 8am traditional service were finding it difficult to get there for 8 o'clock. There were of course consequences. Coffee after the 10.30 service would have meant quite a late morning for some, so we experimented with having it before.

Several things have happened during the year. The 9am service in both churches has gained numbers, so that is good. The 10.30 has not grown! So that is an issue. There are mixed feelings about coffee. Some definitely do not like it before service; others do not want it after.

There was hope that the two congregations might mix during coffee. I am not sure that this has happened to a huge extent, but there has been some.

There is an idea, published in the Bishop of Salisbury's excellent book *God's Pattern*, that suggests that coffee before worship gives those leading the service, in particular those leading the intercessions, a chance to familiarise themselves with any pastoral issues that may need referring to. There have certainly been examples of this here during the year.

Well, our year is coming to a close, and we have to reflect on where we go from here. Is the present pattern right for the parish (not just for us as individuals), or do we need to rethink part or all of it. What is best for building the Kingdom, and encouraging both Beautiful Worship and opportunities for growth?

It is worth remembering that to move one service affects the other. It is also the case that we will have mixed views of this. Please also remember that it was not a clergy initiative, but a response to congregational requests and PCC discussion. So ... anything could

happen. My suggestion is this. That on the 9th January, we have a shortened 10.30 service (like the one we have on the first Sunday of the month), followed by a parish discussion on this issue, plus the opportunity for people to bring up anything else they may have questions about. We could follow this with a Parish Lunch for those who wanted to stay. (Bring food to share so that no one has to do all the cooking).

If you have particular thoughts about this, or any areas you would like us to address, then please speak with me, or one of the Wardens or any member of the PCC. Also, please encourage everyone to attend.

With love and Prayers for a Joyous Christmas and a Glorious New Year,

Fr. Marcus