



Dear Friends,

Let me begin by wishing you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! May you enjoy every blessing over this Christmas season.

As I have been reading the Christmas narratives in Luke's gospel I have been struck again by how the birth of Jesus is good news. My feeling as I approach the end of what feels like a very strange and difficult year, is that we are all in need of some good news. The good news of Christmas is that a baby has been born who is both Saviour and Messiah. These labels may seem so remote from us today that we can fail to see how it is good news. But 2021 may have revealed more than ever how we need a Saviour and a Messiah.

We need a Saviour because our other saviours have been found wanting. The NHS is a wonderful institution established over 70 years ago, which was set up in order to protect us as British citizens, but this year we have been told that we need to protect the NHS. The NHS cannot save us if we need to save it and so we need a better saviour. Similarly we have heard a lot this year about climate change and the need to save the planet. But again, the planet cannot save us if we need to save it. Our lives feel fragile right now and we are in need of a saviour. Neither planet earth nor the mighty NHS are saviour enough: we need Jesus.

We need a Messiah because our leaders always disappoint us. Messiah simply means God's chosen king. We no longer live in an absolute monarchy, but every human society has a leader. For now we have Boris Johnson, whose popularity ratings have fallen to the lowest of any prime minister in recent decades. Like all prime ministers his approval ratings started high—he represented a fresh start, and as a nation we wanted to believe it was different this time—but like all prime ministers his ratings have dropped. We want more from our leaders, and every time we dare to believe it will be different and they fail us, we are left a little bit more cynical and disillusioned than before. Not so with Jesus. Isaiah tells us “the government will be on his shoulders” and “of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.” Jesus is the perfect leader, and we really can dare to dream that life under his leadership will be better, and better forever.

Christmas is good news for us because it is about the birth of a baby—Jesus—who is both Saviour and Messiah. I pray that you would know him as such as we enter 2022.

As we enter 2022 we enter a season that will continue to be strange, perhaps for similar reasons, but definitely for different reasons. We await the arrival of our new vicar, Chris Slater, but before he arrives I plan to take (and it could still change even at this late stage) a three-month sabbatical, which means the parish will be without any stipendiary clergy

for the first time in quite a while. You will be well served by the churchwardens, the retired clergy, and the licensed readers, and hopefully it will not be for the full three months. I plan to spend the first half of my sabbatical studying as I aim to complete a Masters Degree and the second half with family in New Zealand (which looks possible but by no means certain). For those who are interested, I am writing my thesis on the church father, Cyril of Alexandria and his understanding of a doctrine called deification. The reason I chose this topic is that I imagine you have never heard of Cyril or of deification and it may be that we have overlooked a precious insight that could help us in our faith today. Much of the primary literature is available at the Bodleian library, which is where I plan to study for two weeks (if it is open). Verity and I are then going on a retreat run by Keswick ministries before seeing if we can book some last-minute tickets to NZ.

I wish you every blessing in Jesus for 2022.

With much love,

Chris