

NEWSLETTER into touch

Benefice of Clothall, Rushden, Sandon,
Wallington, and Weston



Welcome to this edition of In Touch.

Christmas is fast approaching, and it will be a Christmas such as we have never experienced before and hopefully, with the arrival of the vaccine, one we will not have to face again. But we are all onwards and upwards to celebrate as best we can in the circumstances. We kicked off the Advent Season with a brilliant zoom Advent Service hosted, written, devised, and produced by the team from St Mary the Virgin, Clothall. We were using over 100 screens and about 150 people were online. Together we listened to some beautiful singing by the socially distanced choir who assembled to be pre-recorded and filmed at Clothall in October. This inspiring singing wove through the thoughtful readings and prayers taking us all on a gentle but profound journey of the spirit. At certain points we went live to Lye End to see Tina and Robert Worham lead us through the history and making of an Advent Wreath, right before our eyes. I know that many people were deeply moved by the service. **With blessings Fiona**

On the 20th December at 10am we will be live on Zoom with the Benefice Carol Service. If you have not zoomed with us before, please feel free to join us on this link – there is room for all.

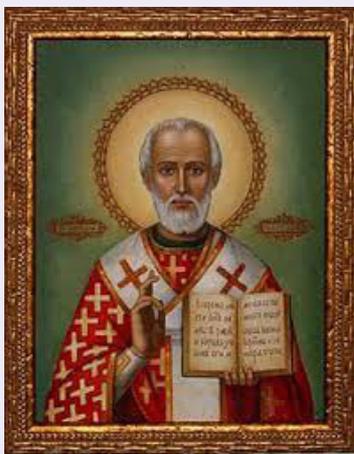
Here is the special link for this service...

<https://bbc.zoom.us/j/98835001003?pwd=WW5hOGZvNlV6SVF6R004YlVndldWUT09>

The meeting ID is:
988 3500 1003

The Passcode is: Christmas
(With a capital C)

6th December **St Nicholas** – a much-loved saint



One account of how Father Christmas began tells of a man named Nicholas who was born in the third century in the Greek

village of Patara, on what is today the southern coast of Turkey. His family were both devout and wealthy, and when his parents died in an epidemic, Nicholas decided to use his inheritance to help people. He gave to the needy, the sick, the suffering. He dedicated his whole life to God's service and was made Bishop of Myra while still a young man. As a bishop in later life, he joined other bishops and priests in prison under the emperor Diocletian's fierce persecution of Christians across the Roman Empire.

Finally released, Nicholas was all the more determined to shed abroad the news of God's love. He did so by giving. One story of his

generosity explains why we hang Christmas stockings over our mantelpieces today. There was a poor family with three daughters who needed dowries if they were to marry, and not be sold into slavery. Nicholas heard of their plight and tossed three bags of gold into their home through an open window – thus saving the girls from a life of misery.

The bags of gold landed in stockings or shoes left before the fire to dry. Hence the custom of children hanging out stockings – in the hope of attracting presents of their own from St Nicholas - on Christmas Eve. That is why three gold balls, sometimes represented as oranges, are one of the

symbols of St Nicholas.

The example of St Nicholas has never been forgotten - in bygone years boys in Germany and Poland would dress up as bishops on 6th December and beg alms for the poor. In the Netherlands and Belgium 'St Nicholas' would arrive on a steamship from Spain to ride a white horse on his gift-giving rounds. To this day, 6th December is still the main day for gift-giving and merry-making in much of Europe. Many people feel that simple gift-giving in early Advent helps preserve a Christmas Day focus on the Christ Child.

The story of mince pies

Mince Pies, like Christmas Puddings, were originally filled with meat, such as lamb, rather than the dried fruits and spices mix as they are today. They were also first made in an oval shape to represent the manger that Jesus slept in as a baby, with the top representing his swaddling clothes. Sometimes they even had a 'pastry baby Jesus' on the top! During the Stuart and Georgian times, in the UK, mince pies were a status symbol at Christmas. Very rich people liked to show off at their Christmas parties by having pies made in different shapes (like stars, crescents, hearts, tears, & flowers); these fancy shaped pies could often fit

together a bit like a jigsaw. They also looked like the 'knot gardens' that were popular during those periods. Having pies like this meant you were rich and could afford to employ the best, and most expensive, pastry cooks.

Now they are normally made in a round shape and are eaten hot or cold. I like mine hot with some ice cream. A custom from the middle ages says that if you eat a mince pie on every day from Christmas to Twelfth Night (evening of the 5th January) you will have happiness for the next 12 months!

On Christmas Eve, children often leave out mince pies with brandy or some similar drink for Father Christmas, and a carrot for the reindeer.





Jacopo Tintoretto: *The Annunciation* (c.1583)

A run down house, the dwelling of poor people. A collapsing wicker chair stands by its wide open entrance with an equally distressed basket alongside. Mary, a large-handed country girl in heavy clothing turns from a dark oak table. Outside, her carpenter husband is occupied with the construction of a wooden frame in his tumbledown yard. You'd think if he was that much of a carpenter he'd fix the place up a bit. Beyond the grimy quarry-tiled area in which his wife is sitting is the only concession to comfort, an ostentatiously canopied bed, though the ceiling above bears witness to former grandeur. Beyond the demolished wall with plaster peeling from the doorframe brickwork portentous thunderclouds rise.

Jacopo Tintoretto, a Venetian painter a generation younger than Titian and in whose studio he briefly worked, has included all the traditional elements seen in paintings of the Annunciation. Mary sits

in her own space divided from the world outside; the book in which she reads the prophecy of the Messiah's birth has fallen into her lap; a diaphanous suggestion of lilies floats before the footstool on which her right leg rests; at the back waits the secluded sanctum into which she withdraws.

But where other Annunciations are gentle, sensitive and courteous, Tintoretto presents a blinding flash of dynamic action, an urgent interruption to Mary's day which dispenses with polite introductions. Gabriel swoops in without his typical gracious deference gesturing wildly at the blazing golden dove firing rays of brilliant light at Mary. In the slipstream of the Holy Spirit a squadron of cherubs zooms over the lintel, a show of divine force to underline the critical importance of Gabriel's message. In the background Joseph works on oblivious to all the commotion.

A prayer for all those affected by coronavirus

*Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy.
Sustain and support the anxious,
be with those who care for the sick,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may find comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us
from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.*

If you would like to donate to any of our churches in the current crisis - details are below. We would be very grateful in your help to keep our churches going.

Thank you.

PCC OF RUSHDEN

LLOYDS BANK: 30-94-30 A/C 01845350

SANDON PAROCHIAL CHURCH COUNCIL
BARCLAYS BANK: 20-73-26 A/C 53610802

PCC ST MARYS CHURCH WALLINGTON
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BARCLAYS BANK: 20-41-12 A/C 40946850

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Other artists allow Mary no more than an expression of mild surprise at the sudden onset of the host of heaven. But Tintoretto's Mary displays the natural human reaction to this idea of heaven breaking into earth in such crazy smash-and-grab fashion. She is certainly not a 'be it unto me according thy word' kind of girl, not yet anyway. This is a 'what - me?' Mary, a potential Christ-child bearer shocked and incredulous - 'how can it be me, I mean look at the state of this place!'

'The state of this place' is Tintoretto's way of depicting the old world of exhausted, decaying cultures and empires with their now dead gods. That ornate ceiling shows how grand they once were, and how far they have fallen into dilapidation. But Christ is coming to redeem the world and his advent is exciting, awe-inspiring. It's enough to make a poor girl drop her book isn't it?

Mistletoe

by Kirsty Steele

This time of year you can see all sorts of traditions played out with regard to Christmas decorations. Strict adherents use holly, ivy and of course, mistletoe. While holly and ivy are to be found in gardens and hedgerows, mistletoe usually only appears in greengrocers' shops, or high in a tree well out of reach.

Mistletoe is hemiparasitic, meaning that although its leaves enable it to feed itself through photosynthesis, its roots invade the host tree or shrub to extract water and other

nutrients. Its favourite host trees are apple, lime, hawthorn, poplar or oak and it normally hangs as a large globe, tantalisingly high and totally visible once winter arrives and it is the only green left on the tree. There are some spectacular examples in Windsor Great Park, clearly visible from the path on the opposite side of the River Thames.

We all know about the almost translucent white berries, fleshy and sticky, which form in the forks of mistletoe's many branches. While they are toxic to humans, they are attractive to birds. When birds have enjoyed the juicy flesh, they wipe the remaining seeds off their beaks onto the nearest branch [somewhat like small

children wiping sticky hands on any surface close by - mummy's face or clothes?]. With luck the seed remains stuck to the bark and solves mistletoe's problem of reproduction.

In Greek mythology, mistletoe gave access to the Underworld. Romans thought it represented Peace, Love and Understanding and perhaps that is how it has sidled into our Christmas celebrations. The earliest documentary evidence for kissing under mistletoe dates from the sixteenth century. Some people think a berry should be removed after each kiss. Given the small size of pieces generally available these days, perhaps that is a practice not to be pursued!