Christmas Magazine

St Laurence's Anglican Church (UK) with St Matthew's Episcopal Church (USA)

December 2014

Highlights of 2014 at St Laurence's

The generosity of friends in response to our insurance fund appeal.

The Lent study course. This year we followed the story of Les Miserables.

Friendship with St Matthew's in Alaska.

Generous local support of the First World War exhibitions in the Church Hall.

Meeting relatives of men listed on our First World War memorial.

Race nights and quiz nights in the Church Hall.

Confirmation service with Bishop Pete Broadbent and twelve children and adults.

Baptising the children of former youth club members.

Cathy's painted Easter candle and a new painting of St Laurence also by Cathy!

Teddy Bear Travels

St Laurence's church member Claire George is raising money for international charity Christian Aid by collecting photographs of soft toys she has sent to churches outside the UK.

If your church outside the UK would like to help by hosting a teddy bear or other furry creature and then sending in photos, please email Claire through Fr Steve Hardwicke, stlaurence258@gmail.com.

All denominations are welcome to participate. The primary objective of the project is to form friendships between churches and to get folk talking to each other.

Right: Mr Orangutan travelled from Debenhams department store in Uxbridge (UK) to Circle in the Arctic Circle in Alaska!

St Laurence Cowley Anglican Church in London, England, publishes a magazine every Christmas. For the first time, St Laurence's is sharing it with **St Matthew's Episcopal Church** in Fairbanks, Alaska. We hope you enjoy the articles and photographs, contributed by friends in England and Alaska.

The two churches began making friends in summer 2014. Learning about St Matthew's and also about Native Alaskan culture has been one of the highlights of the year for folk in Cowley. We have been particularly taken by the church's work with the street people community in Fairbanks.

If you would like to make a donation to St Matthew's, you can do so via their website stmatthewschurch.org.

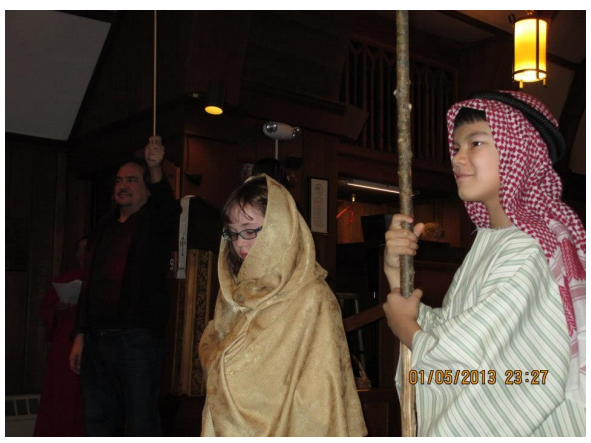
We hope you enjoy this magazine. Have a happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY PLAY ALASKA STYLE

Shared by: Val Adams - Youth Ministry
St Matthew's Episcopal Church Fairbanks, Alaska

In working in youth ministry, I have had the privilege & challenge of coordinating a Christmas play at St Matthew's Episcopal Church in Fairbanks, Alaska. The Feast of the Epiphany is traditionally held on January 6th every year and this is when St Matthew's usually performs our Christmas Play, of the nativity of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our last play had an "Alaska twist" to it, in that the 3 wise men were Alaska themed. There was a prospector, a fisherman, and a trapper … all of which relate directly to life in the Last Frontier, our 49th state, of the fifty states of the United States of America.



There was an amazing variety of people, from youth … to adults … to elders, involved in the Feast of Epiphany play. International recognition is extended to the cast.

Youth cast members: Jaylynn Hebert (prophet), Kaydence Cadzow (shepherd), Jessica Reed (Mary), Jaycie Bessette (Angel Gabriel), Isaiah Horace (Joseph), and Ivy Olsen (Narrator). Adult cast members: Deborah Ely (fisherman), Shannon Houlette (inn keeper), Allan Hayton (star of Bethlehem). A special kudos to our elder cast members: Bill Stevens (Prospector), Casey Smith (trapper), and Pat Sackinger (prophet).

The play concluded with Takudh songs by the Intertribal Chillig Singers singing in our Gwich'in Athabascan language. What a great way to honor our Lord & Savior!!

A short story by Reverend Rob Harrison

Not much is known about the three Unwise Men. They saw a new star in the east and they followed it. It wasn't a tremendously bright star. But then, they weren't tremendously bright men. Nonetheless, it was new and it was shiny, and they decided to follow it.

Their journey was long, and full of adventure, and it brought them in the end to the mighty Pacific Ocean, on the coast of China. After that, as they had no boat, they could go no further.

No-one knows what happened to those three Unwise Men after that. Perhaps they settled down and married nice Chinese girls. But we can be fairly sure that they never found what they were looking for, because they never stopped to wonder what they were looking for in the first place. They just saw a shiny, new star, and off they went after it. Not very wise of them.

The Wise Men, on the other hand, have a different story. They saw the new star, and paused to think about it. That's what wise people do. They thought that only the Creator, could put a new star in the sky. And they surmised that if the Creator was doing something so new and so different in the heavens, He was probably doing something equally new and different on the earth. A new kind of wearable technology perhaps, but more likely a new kind of king. A little research informed them that the people who knew most about the Creator were the Jews, who lived to the west, near the shores of the humble Mediterranean Sea. So they packed their bags, turned their backs to the new star, and headed straight for the Jewish capital - Jerusalem.

It has to be said that the Wise Men, didn't quite hit the target. But they had only missed by four miles, unlike the three Unwise men, who were an impressive seven thousand miles astray.

And here's the crunch. Whereas the Unwise Men got to see the mighty Pacific Ocean, and may or may not have married nice Chinese girls, the Wise Men got so see a tiny baby, new-born of the Creator in a bold attempt to show Homo Sapiens (and Homo not-so-Sapiens) just how much he loved them.

By the Reverend Robert Harrison of St John's Hillingdon in the Diocese of London. To find out more about Rob's Christian fiction visit his Amazon's author's page at www.amazon.co.uk/Robert-Harrison/e/B0034OV00S/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_0.

Rob's books included **Oriel's Travels: An Archangel's Travels with St Paul!**

Christmas for me as a child was magical. Christmas Eve we went to bed at 8pm no sign of Christmas. We put an empty pillow case at the bottom of our bed.

Previous months we had helped our mum with the making of mincemeat and Christmas pudding which she made every year. As if by magic when we get up on Christmas morning and go downstairs the decorations are up, the Christmas tree decorated.

On Christmas morning when we awoke the pillow case was full, it contained a piece of coal, a tangerine, a sugar mouse, some chocolate and other presents. I enjoyed Christmas as a child as we had food that we did not have on a regular basis, figs, dates, fruit, nuts, and chocolates.

Christmas dinner was sprouts, potatoes roasted, but the meat was either pork, beef or chicken. Christmas pudding was always served with home made rum sauce followed by mince pies. After listening to the Queen's speech we played games and opened presents from under the Christmas tree. Tea time we had a special tea followed by a piece of Christmas cake mum had made, and dad had iced.

By Dot O'Shea of St Laurence Cowley

After the 9pm Christmas Eve Mass at St Laurence Cowley last year!

Jane Richardson Jensen would like to share a prayer her mother wrote.

"May the Joy that is Christmas thrill you with a sense of life's wonder;

May the Peace that is Christmas still your heart in a troubled world;

May the Hope that is Christmas enable you to face the future with undaunted faith;

May the Love that is Christmas re-affirm your conviction that God is Love, and you are His."

A Christmas Prayer, 1981, by Martha Gates Richardson (1927-2014), Formerly of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX

A Wee Martian and Baby Jesus by Jane Richardson Jensen,
Advent 1992, St. Columba's SEC, Bathgate, W. Lothian, Scotland

My five-year-old daughter was helping me set out the nativity scene for the first time. She put the angel on its hook on the roof of the stable and carefully placed the cow, the donkey, and the sheep around Mary and Joseph who were beside the empty manger.

After she finished, I opened the box of ceramic animals a Chinese graduate student had given my husband (then a Sr. Lecturer at Heriot-Watt). It was a set of the 12 figures from the Chinese zodiac (the horse, sheep, monkey, etc.). Most of these wee animals had tiny wire coils for their ears and tails.

My husband had given me the set to display. Looking around the living room, I asked my daughter where she wanted to put these. She said, "With the other animals in the stable." She named each one as she found a spot for it.

I picked up one odd looking creature and said, "Hmm, what do you think this one is?" She took it from me, held it up to look at it closely, and then said, "It's a wee Martian come to worship the baby Jesus. We'll put him right here (next to the manger)."

I treasured my daughter's generosity in giving a being from outer space a front row seat to see the Baby Jesus when he was laid in the manger. As the child was, so the now-grown woman is – still generous and welcoming.

Jane was transplanted to St. Martin's Anglican Church, Calgary, Alberta via St. Matthew's, Fairbanks, AK and St. Francis, College Station, TX.

For her books, see calgaryauthors.com

"The Light shines in the darkness" (even when sleeping!)
Advent 3, 2011 Picture by Jane Richardson Jensen

This was part of an intergenerational program at St Martin's Calgary. Each person got a verse from the Gospel lessons read between Advent I through Epiphany to illustrate in some way. Then the designs were photographed and made into a slide show for Epiphany Sunday.

Save the Pangolins!

Pangolins are covered in tough, overlapping scales. They eat ants and termites using a long, sticky tongue, and are able to quickly roll themselves up into a tight ball when threatened. They also deter predators by hissing and puffing, and lashing their sharp edged tails.

Eight different pangolin species can be found across Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Poaching for illegal wildlife trade and habitat loss have made these incredible creatures one of the most endangered groups of mammals in the world.

Some pangolin species such as the Chinese pangolin sleep in underground burrows during the day, and others including **African tree pangolins and Malayan pangolins are known to sleep in trees**. Pangolins are well adapted for digging: they dig burrows with their strong front legs and claws, using their tails and rear legs for support and balance.

Tunneling underground, they excavate the sides and roofs of passages by pushing up and from side to side with their tough scaled bodies.

Chinese pangolins (*Manis pentadactyla*) spend the winter months in deep burrows. These are near termite nests that provide a lasting food source. **In Chinese legend pangolins are said to travel all around the world underground**, and in the Cantonese language the name for pangolins translates to "the animal that digs through the mountain," or "Chun-shua-cap," which translates to "scaly hill-borer."

To read more visit the source for this text at savepangolins.org

A Visit from Self Help Africa

Lyn with Fr Steve

In November Matthew from the charity Self Help Africa travelled all the way from Loughborough to give a talk in St Laurence Cowley's 10am Sunday service. He told us about this wonderful charity, which helps farmers in Africa through training and practical assistance.

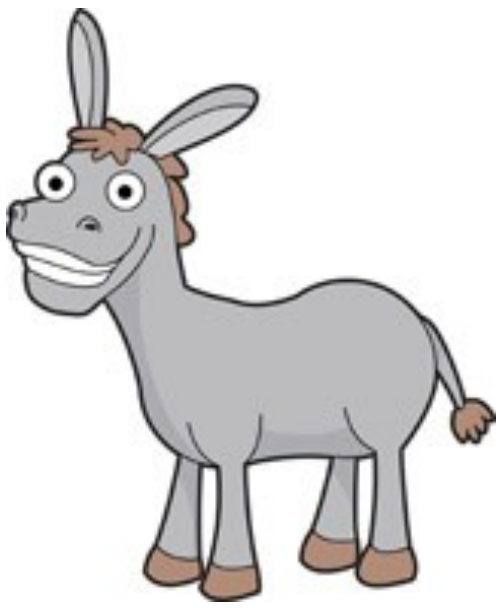
It wasn't the first time we'd heard about Self Help Africa of course! Thanks to the tireless efforts of church member Lyn Colpman, St Laurence's has been kept in touch with the charity for many years.

We learnt that 69% of people south of the Sahara work in agriculture and that half of the farmers are women. We also found out that economic growth in agriculture helps the poor twice as much as growth in other industries.

At Christmas when our thoughts turn to the rural poor who became Jesus's family and welcomed him in Bethelehem, there may be no better charity to support than Self Help Africa!

To find out more visit selfhelpafrica.org

The Adoration of the Pangolins



"Quick, come and see this!"

"Not now I'm busy," said Harum.

This was perfectly true as he was snacking on three or four hundred ants at the time.

"But this is incredible," I said "**it's a happy donkey**."

"Whaaat!"

Harum executed a complicated manoeuvre which involved withdrawing his snout from the ant's lair, jumping backwards, turning 180 degrees in the air and landing shoulder to shoulder with me in something under a second.

"Impossible," he snorted then "Incredible."

"I told you so," I said, no doubt annoyingly.

We both gazed wonderingly at the phenomenon. Even when not carrying a load donkeys are a morose bunch. When fully laden they are misery incarnate. Yet this chap was not only carrying a bundle of human chattels and knick-knacks but also a human female who can best be described as extremely heavy with child. And under it all **the donkey fairly radiated good cheer**. He was positively grinning and walking with a verve and enthusiasm which qualified him as one donkey in a million.

"You have a good memory Scarum," accurately observed Harum "In all the history of the Lost Tribe of the Pangolins **has a happy donkey ever been seen before?**"

"I can't answer for the entire history," I answered "but I can say that it has never been mentioned in the oral accounts of our folk here at Bethlehem, neither have our cousins at Jerusalem or Jericho ever passed on such a story to us. And it certainly isn't in any of the five Books of Noses."

While we had been talking the little party, two humans, male and female, and our happy donkey, had been making their way along the valley and getting closer to us. I was half-minded to call out to the jolly quadruped to ask him the reason for his high spirits. The Law of Noses, however, is quite firm about forbidding us to deliberately draw human attention upon ourselves so I stayed silent and entranced by the sight. Pangolins are well camouflaged in this region so the Lady and the man did not see us. Animals of course are much more acute about these things so our donkey had no problem spotting us. **Observing animal etiquette he didn't do anything to cause his companions to notice us but he did give a cheery nod and actually winked at us. No word of a lie, the donkey palpably winked.**

"We have a religious obligation to look into this more deeply," I said.

"We do?" Queried Harum "Religious in what sense?"

"The Cosmic Pangolin created us with long snouts so that we could stick them into things and longer tongues so that we could talk about it afterwards." I pointed out.

"Hmm," he grunted. Harum is a New Atheist and has some crazy theory about 'evolutionary purpose' but clearly did not want to argue the point. "How do you propose to do this 'looking into it' exactly?"

"**The humans must be bound for Bethlehem** so all we have to do is sneak into town at night when they are asleep and ask the donkey why he's so uppish."

"Risky, very risky Scarum. It comes perilously close to breaking the Law of Noses."

"Not if we do our best to avoid humans. It won't be the first time Pangolins have gone into town, young folk do it for a lark sometimes."

"And not all of them return either."

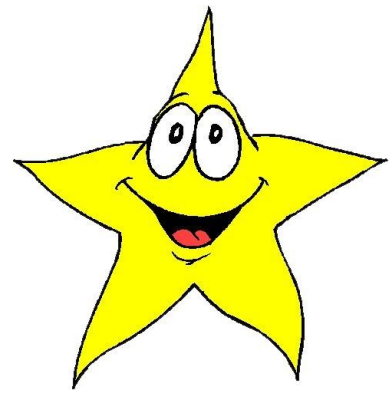
"We are old enough and wise enough to manage the thing safely. **Anyway, admit it Harum you'd likely die of curiosity if you didn't find out about the happy donkey**."

"Maybe, maybe not. Look, I'll finish my snack while you work out ways and means. If you come up with a workable scheme then we'll both go in. If not you're on your own.

An expedition was not, perhaps, entirely safe but nor was it as risky as Harum seemed to think. In the Holy Land there was a sort off 'live and let live' dynamic between the Big People and us pangolins. It hasn't always been so. In the days of our ancestors in Egypt pangolins suffered dreadfully. **Poachers slaughtered our forbears in huge numbers. Partly in order to eat our flesh but mostly to strip our bodies of our scales.** These they sold to merchants who, I believe, sent them over the seas to be used in magic potions. At that time the Cosmic Pangolin heard the cries of her people and called the Prophet Noses out from their midst to lead them to freedom.

He gathered such of the pangolins as would follow him and had faith in the Cosmic One and led them out of Egypt. They would have been stymied by the Red Sea had not Noses been granted the power to carry out a singular miracle. Invoking the name of the Cosmic Pangolin he struck the waters three times with his magnificent snout. **The sea parted before our ancestors and they were enabled to cross dry shod.** Unfortunately they had to move with much more speed than really suits the dignity of a pangolin as a whole bunch of humans led by a man with a beard and a big stick took advantage of our miracle to cross as well. On the far side as they were resting from their exertions our ancestors saw to their horror all the poachers of Egypt racing across the sea bed crying "Death to the Pangolins." The Cosmic One heard their dreadful threatenings and at once released the waters which swept the hunters to their

doom. Even the humans who had travelled in our coat tails seemed glad that **the Lost Tribe of Pangolins had been saved.**



In the Holy Land all the Children of Men and sons and daughters of the Cosmic Pangolin were descendants of these escapees. This meant, as I said, that we did not trouble each other much. Still the less the weak attract the attention of the strong the safer the weak will be, so my expedition with Harum would require some careful planning to minimise our visibility.

"Well?" He asked when fully replete.

"**You know that new star that had begun to shine recently?**"

"Yeees...but I don't see what..."

"Listen, Harum, it shines brightly enough to help us see fairly well but not brightly enough to help humans unless they want to use it for navigation."

"That's true enough."

"**The donkey is a stranger here or we would have recognised him**. Strangers in Bethlehem always stay at the caravanserai. So, if we make our way into town when the only light is starlight and most humans are asleep then we can get to and from the caravanserai easily enough and have plenty of time to hear the donkey's story."

"It sounds straightforward enough. It might even work."

"It will work. Are you in Harum?"

He scratched his snout thoughtfully for a moment.

"By Dawkins" he said eventually "yes Scarum, I am in!"

(Continued on the next page)

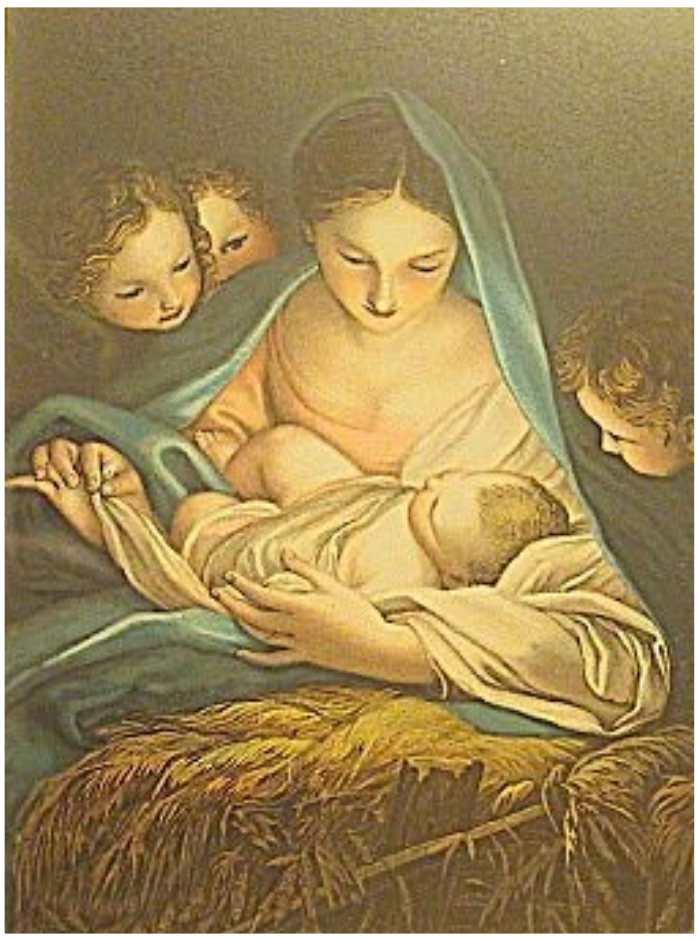
Things to do at St Laurence Cowley

Courses: Throughout the year we run courses in the evenings in Fr Steve's living room at the Rectory. These are a relaxed and friendly way to learn about the Christian faith. Activities include watching films, eating cake and chatting. Check stlaurencecowley.org or the posters on the wall outside church for dates and times.

Coffee mornings: Every Saturday since time began home made cake and hot drinks have been served by a dedicated rota of coffee morning volunteers in the Church Hall from 10am to 11am.

Cake can also be bought to take home, but bring a container!

For weekly information about these and other activities at St Laurence's, ask Fr Steve to put you on the notice sheet email list. Email him at stlaurence258@gmail.com.



It was well after midnight when we found ourselves heading into the centre of Bethlehem. **Apart from some shepherds on the outskirts of town all the humans seemed to be asleep.** Near the caravanserai was a little cave set in a hill where lumber and bits and bobs from the inn were stored. As we came level with it we heard some doves billing. **There was definite cooing as well.**

"Wait a moment." said Harum.

"You're not frightened by doves are you?" I asked scornfully.

"Of course not Scarum. I am wondering, though, why they are not asleep."

"Maybe they are having a party. It's no business of ours. **Happy doves are ten a penny we have a happy donkey to find.**"

"Happy midnight doves are an unusual thing. And happy donkeys are an unusual thing. Perhaps if we investigate the one we will discover the other too."

"Are you going all, like, Sherlock on me?"

"Nothing of the sort, I'm just making an elementary deduction."

He had a point of course so after a little more discussion we changed course and headed for the grotto. This was L shaped with the entrance corridor being the short bottom stroke and the inner chamber opening to the right. **As we entered we could see a light and hear the soft sound of human voices.**

The corridor itself was dim and had plenty of hiding places so we cautiously inched forward. As we got nearer to the room **we could see the doves fluttering about in joyful agitation**. Beyond them was an ox with a beatific expression on his face and our friend the donkey looking tenfold more delighted than ever if such a thing were possible.

"Its way too dangerous to speak to the donkey," whispered Harum, "so what next?"

"They are all looking at something," I answered, "maybe if we just peeked round the corner we would get a clue about what's so joy inducing."

"That's almost as risky as speaking isn't it?"

"Not quite. And remember, long snout, longer tongue."

So with infinite caution we slowly, slowly got into position to see the whole of the room. And then we understood.

By Steve Hepburn, a Catholic Scotsman transplanted to Exeter in England. To read more of his work visit his blog at catholicscot.blogspot.co.uk

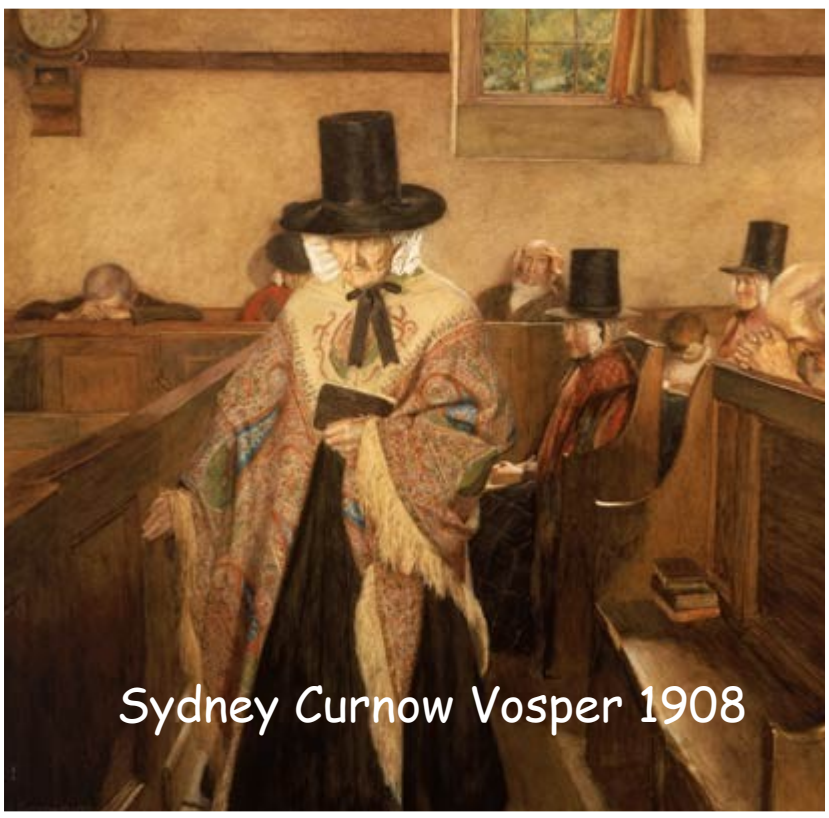
Guilt

Traditional Welsh costume

As a child I remember going into my parent's bedroom to help my mum with something but I was extremely nosey and started to look around. I found a very interesting object, asked mum what it was she did not know. It belonged to my dad and she told me to put it back where I found it.

The object I talk about was very pretty, old and interesting. My father died when I was 18, the object was part of a collection of his. After his death mum showed me and my brother the collection and we chose what we were interested in. My sister was not present but some was left for her. The collection was bought in China during the Second World War from a poor person, he told mum he would not sell it unless he was destitute. WE certainly did not have much money but the collection remained .This is where the guilt comes into play on three accounts.

Firstly when I found it as a child I thought I had broken it. Since being owned by me it did get damaged slightly due to changes in storage conditions and central heating affecting its condition. This year I decided to sell it via auction but there were my deceased mothers' words ringing in my ears which made me feel guilty. I justified the selling of the item by giving the money to a good cause .


Sydney Curnow Vosper 1908

It fetched more than I was expecting but after auction fees it was reduced but still more than I expected. The majority of it I gave to the church, a small sum to the local Dyspraxia support group, and a small amount to my daughters .

Distributing the sum of money in this way I did not feel so guilty about selling the item.

As a child we were told that if something did not belong to us we do not touch it so a lot of things were out of bounds. Also it was a case of children should be seen and not heard, and there were areas we were not allowed, very much a Victorian upbringing in some ways. My parents were older than most of the children's parents in the small village in Wales where we lived. It was also a case of every one knowing who was connected to who so there was no chance of doing wrong without being found out as my grandparents, aunt and uncle lived across the road and they knew all the villagers.

by Dot O'Shea, St Laurence Cowley

Gwich'in is a language of the Native Alaskans. Like Welsh in Britain, it has suffered through English dominance. Efforts are being made to ensure it thrives. Here are some words for you to learn.

Drin Tsal = Christmas

Ahshu' = It snowed

Too oozrii = Moon

Mahsi' Choo = Thank you

Neegoo tsoo = Red fox

Jirh = Mittens

Spooky stories at Christmas!

It might sound strange to us now, but in Britain it used to be a tradition to share spooky stories at Christmas time. The nights were dark, and friends were gathered together. So what better time for a good scare!

The next two stories in this magazine were written by E.J. Reading and inspired by the spooky Christmas stories of M.R. James. James was a clergyman's son who studied classics at Cambridge and became provost at Eton public school (not far from Cowley). He specialised in tales about weird objects and haunted books.

If you are looking for more spooky stories to read this Christmas time, you can do no better than **A Christmas Carol** by Charles Dickens. At St Laurence Cowley last year we based our Christmas carol service around it. Not because it was a clever play on words, but because Dickens' story is all about the Christian message!

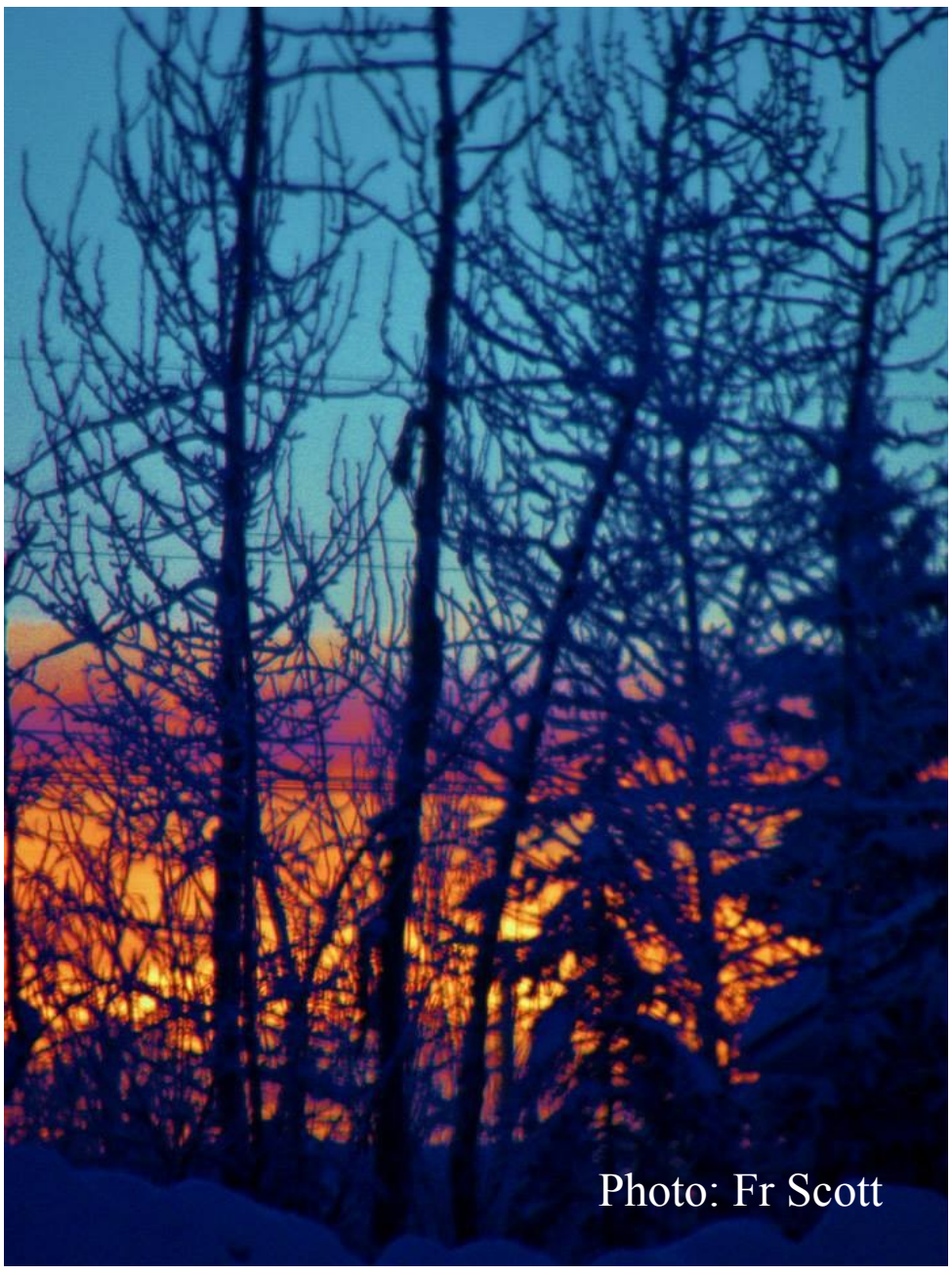


Photo: Fr Scott

Peter John of Minto

Peter John was an elder who knew a great deal about the traditions of the Athabascans, a native people of Alaska. He spent much of his life living in a traditional way in the countryside. He was also a very devout follower of the Holy Spirit.

Peter John's thoughts and experiences are freely available online in a PDF eBook called *The Gospel According to Peter John.*

When I read Peter John's words in London this summer I was struck by the freshness, warmth and vitality of his relationship with God.

As an adult convert to Christianity I haven't always found the Church a very comfortable fit. Peter John's words have given me the confidence to make my own path and not worry about fitting in. I recommend them!

"

The angel in the lot by E.J. Reading

Mary's late life baby, the orphan boy, the thief, the saint. My cousin Jacob picks up labels the way a kindergartener catches colds. I was twenty when Aunt Mary died. Jacob was a cute and chubby six. Grandma adopted him; then she sauntered into a second girlhood.

Already a thief, Jacob moved in with me. He was so very difficult. I loved him but wished him gone. I was more man-child than man myself. A cub can't raise a troubled kid. In that situation you've got to hope that God IS the father.

Around town they say Wild Jacob changed when he saw an angel out front at the dementia home. He looked through a window and there it was. Twice the height of a man, shining with an intense white light, inviting him to wrestle and jar a hip. That's not true, it's something folk say on account of Jacob being called Jacob. There is a strange story, and it's true too.

There was an incident. The years had passed chaotically and in a bad way. I was forty, which means Jacob was twenty-six. He lived with us mostly, except when my wife Esme barred him for stealing.

A few weeks before the end of Wild Jacob, he gave me a phone. By the standards of the day it was a beauty. Long and wide, flawed by a single crack; dropped in the act of theft I guessed.

"It's yours, I insist," said Jacob, stamping his feet for warmth on the front doorstep. He was barred that month for selling my wife's computer. I knew where he was sleeping. There was a friend I paid to look after him. Gimpy Roy looked and smelled like the devil but took in anything and anyone needing a home. Every town needs a Gimpy Roy.

"No you're ok," I said sternly, trying to press the stolen property back into Jacob's hands. "Take it where you sold the computer." He wouldn't. He resisted touching the phone as if it were a diseased rat.

"No, I don't want it," he said. He looked unwell. My anger weakened.

"Come in. We'll talk about it," I said. "We can have lunch but you're not sleeping here."

He shook his head. "No." His voice wobbled. "No." Then he took off running down the street. It's the drugs, I thought. No boy was ever sensible on drugs.

My wife was thudding a ball of dough against the kitchen table.

"Who was that?"

"Jacob." I held up the phone.

She sighed. "Put it in the bin."

I hid the phone in my locked desk drawer. It could wait until a charity came round appealing for old electricals. Theft doesn't excuse waste, I thought.

The days passed, became weeks, there was no word from Jacob. Roy told me the boy was losing weight and anxious. He said someone was following him, watching him, whispering words in empty rooms.

"What words?" I said.

"The same three over and over," said Roy. "Cold, trapped, water."

I wanted to take a rope and drag Jacob to rehab. If only the boy could be forced to change. I prayed for him.

Despite our lifestyle we were churchgoers, even in those days. The angels lifted Our Lord up but He spent His days in the dirt with sinners. Esme was organising a big church quiz and raffle, so for a month my evenings were spent driving around town arranging the prizes.

It was a dry Autumn, but our house was troubled by patches of wet moss high on our walls and ceilings. It was the strangest thing. At night they dripped water. We moved our furniture and put down buckets, but each night the moss seemed to go a little to the left or right of where it was before. It was aggravating and almost childish. Our neighbours' houses were unaffected.

It bothered us, but life goes on, and Esme's thoughts were mostly for the quiz and raffle. A local newspaper was coming. It might help future fundraising, we thought.

We invited Roy to the quiz night. Nobody would have him on a team, so he sat with the senior women's flower club and amazed them with his general knowledge. With smiling faces, happy in a new friendship, they won second overall. Beaming, Roy stayed behind to help clean up.

"Jacob's no better," he said when we were alone together, sweeping cigarette stubs out of the men's washroom. I sighed.

We were just locking up when my phone beeped a message alert in my pocket. It was a photo with a brief caption. "Come get your thief."

The picture, taken with a powerful flash, showed Jacob seated, slumped against a road sign with his arms raised above his head. He was craning his face away from the photographer, too afraid to look at him or her. The flowers and trinkets littered around Jacob told me where he was; the Rossiter pond junction. Everyone knew it. Three kids crashed their principal's car there the beginning of August. Esme came home crying when she saw the vehicle pulled out of the water.

I left Esme with friends and went with Roy in his truck. It was a twenty minute drive, even on empty roads at that hour of the night. Jacob could be heard shrieking and screaming, fox like, from up the road. As we drew closer we could see him tugging and pulling against the junction sign, though we found no ropes or bonds on him at all.

He saw us, he smiled, stopped struggling, even relaxed.

"I won't do it no more. I won't do it no more." He panted.

I put my arms around him, didn't let go until we were at the hospital. He was as soft and docile as a newborn.

"I'm always with you," I reminded him. "Even if I don't show it."

He was unhurt; high and drunk, but for the last time. He asked to go to rehab and he's been sober ever since. It hasn't been simple for Jacob the Saint, but he's done it. We never mentioned that night again.

He still lives with Roy. The two run a fully licensed animal shelter. They've won awards for their charity work in the community. Jacob's even made friends with Esme. One Christmas a few years ago he saved up, bought her a new computer, with the receipt pinned to the wrapping.

When Jacob was just a few months out of rehab, me and Esme moved house. The wet moss got to us so much. All we could do was run white paint over it, hope the buyers wouldn't notice. They didn't, which was odd.

I transported my desk in the back of Roy's van. It was only in our new home, the one we live in now behind the churchyard, that I unlocked the drawer and remembered the stolen phone. The battery was flat. I found a compatible power charger. The screen lit for half a second, then the glass cracked and it went black.

Without hesitation I threw the phone into a plastic bag, took it into the churchyard and smashed it with a rock. It was the work of three minutes. I didn't even look for a spade, I dug the hole with my bare hands, didn't rest until the thing was buried in holy ground.

Esme saw me come back covered in dirt.

"What are you doing?"

"Dead rat in my desk drawer," I said. "Had to bury it."

She gave me one of her trademark enquiring looks.

I'm not certain, I'm not sure, but I thought I saw the last picture message ever sent from that phone. "Come get your thief."

Not spooked out enough yet? There's another short story on the following page.

The Mouse Saint

Should you visit Old Whitty village, look in on St Agatha's church. Don't miss your chance! If the church door is locked (as is likely) telephone the vicar. He or she will be glad of visitors. Old Whitty is an isolated place.

Once inside, go to the stone baptismal font. It's Victorian, not impressive, but there is an interesting carving on the base. Surrounded by leaves and bunches of grapes, a mouse in a monk's robe stands on its hind legs.

The "guide," a sheet of laminated paper tied to the candle stand by a length of string, explains this figure through the story of the mouse saint. Eight centuries ago, Lady Beatrice de Whitty, affrighted by Lucifer, births a boy with the face of a mouse. The infant and his nurse hide in Blacksmith's Wood, just beyond Old Whitty.

Every Christmas Eve of his short life, the Mouse Saint and the nurse deposit gold coins on the doorsteps of poor villagers. Being a mouse by nature he needs no money. Out of love the nurse becomes a mouse too.

My father was vicar at St Agatha's from 1990 to 1998. The church council, in those days enthusiastically protestant, wanted the carving removed. The furry fellow was a product of unbiblical imagination! He had to go! Dad was the mouse's great defender. He said it was there to remind us that Satan marks no one who is for the poor.

I always felt there was something behind Dad's passion. After his death I found it in a ragged yellow magazine, kept in a cardboard box with Mum's fossil collection. An article on page nine details the then recent restoration of St Agatha's (this was in 1860). “Decayed medieval features” have been removed to open the interior to daylight. A new font is installed, and on it there is “a carved tribute to the hermit Richard Mumsby.” The article then proceeds to tell the tale of this unusual man.

How the story of Richard Mumsby was lost after 1860 I will never understand. Perhaps an Edwardian cleric, deciding it was too potent for the uneducated, put about the softer version.

In the time of Charles II, three full centuries past, James Mumsby, vicar at St Agatha's sent his boy Richard to Oxford to study Divinity. Richard stayed for three months, then returned to Old Whitty in secret and secluded himself in Blacksmith's Wood.

Someone reported the lad to his father. Thrice James went into the wood to capture his renegade child. Each time Richard climbed high into a tree and threatened to throw himself down if not left alone to pray. The vicar relented. He had a stone hut built in the wood and arranged for a regular provision of bread and wine to be left at its door. He did not see his son again. The saints are stubborn people.

James died. The villagers saw Richard at the funeral, standing in the rain outside the church porch. His hair and beard were so long and matted nobody could tell if he wore clothes. He ran off without speaking.

By an arrangement in the will, Richard's supply of bread and wine continued. The baker's family were the main witnesses to what happened next, but not the only ones. A wood can be a busy place at night. Secret Roman Catholics heard strange noises, high pitched shrieks and thudding. Poachers passing in the dark slipped in freshly churned up mud outside the hut. The ground around Richard's home became a sinister clearing, denuded of trees and vegetation.

The baker and his sons visited weekly, always together, always at noon, always clutching their crucifixes. Everyone else avoided the place, first out of fear, then habit. Only the faithful saw the flower meadow grow.

Beyond Blacksmith's Wood the world forged on. Half a century went by and with it the last of the Stuart monarchs. In the time of the first King George the baker's grandsons found Richard neatly laid out on the grass outside his hut. There were wild roses in his long white beard, which flowed to his feet as soft as silk.

They took Richard to St Agatha's, where the villagers buried him in his father's grave. The last men in church afterwards, the ones who heaved the tombstone into place, claimed they were forced to leap up onto the pillars. Before the hole could be sealed, a great crowd of mice tumbled into church. They circled the grave, seemed to bow their heads to it, then scampered out into the sun.

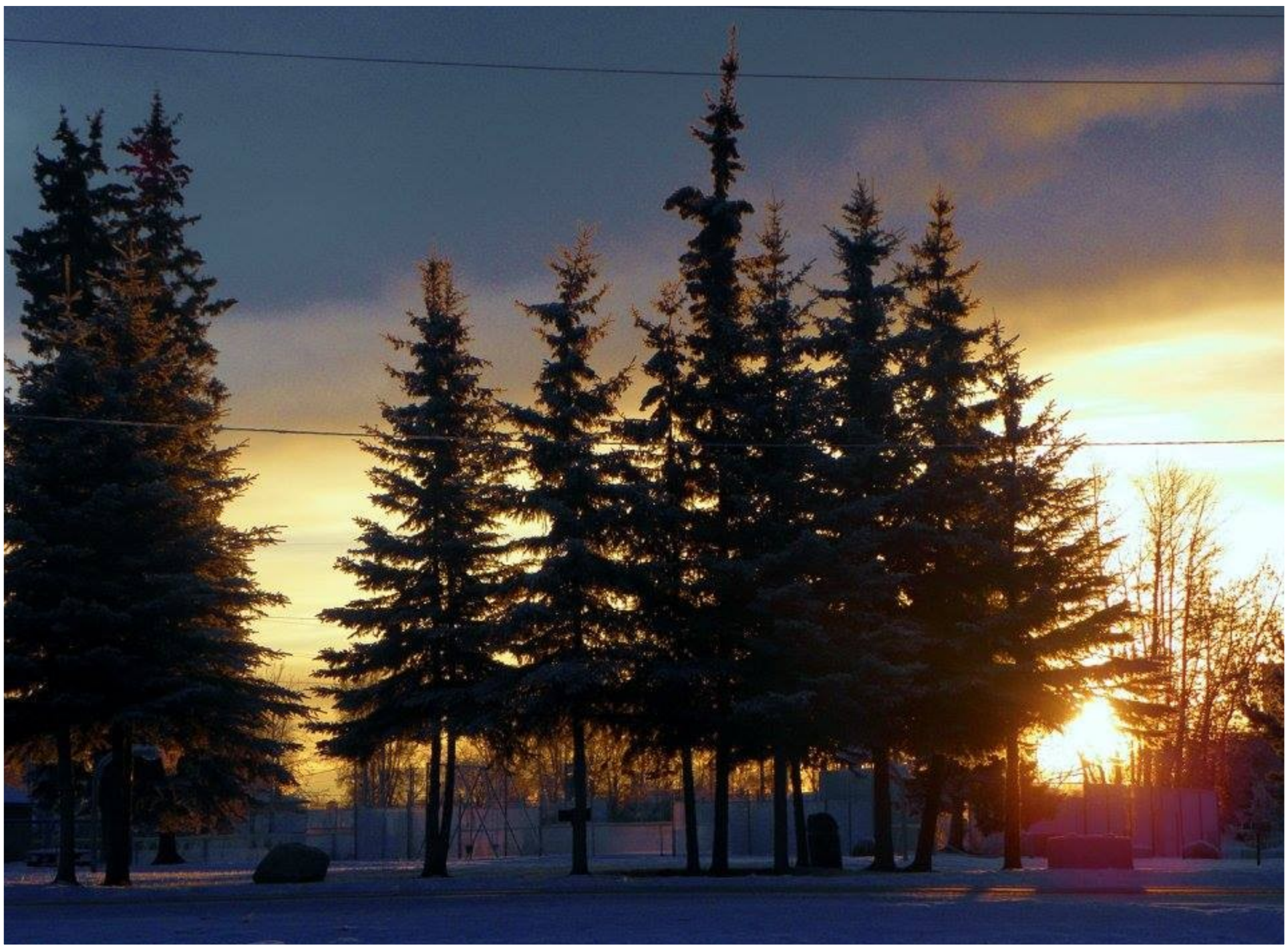
Amazed, the men closed the tomb and told William Rockford, vicar of the place.

Rockford wrote an account of Richard's life, but discovered no explanation for the whole of it.

Story: E.J. Reading Pictures: Fr Scott Fisher

The photography of Fr Scott Fisher

On Facebook Fr Scott's photographs of Alaska give his friends a real and daily glimpse of the Holy Spirit in nature



What happened at St Matthew's in 2014?

We came together. An estimated 25, 855 people attended services connected with St. Matthew's from January 1st through Saturday, November 22nd.

We lit candles and prayed and broke bread. From January 1st, 2014, through Saturday, November 22nd, there were 454 Eucharists celebrated (174 Private or Home Eucharists, 145 Weekday Eucharists, 155 Sunday Eucharists.). There were 58 Daily Office celebrations.

Among those Eucharists was an historic Takudh Eucharist celebrated in June, which brought together Gwitch'in people from Alaska and Canada and drew international coverage. One nice and holy result of that has been meeting St. Laurence Cowley Church in England, and our on-going relationship.

We stood together at the major intersections of Life. Within that Time Period there were 12 weddings, 60 funerals, 34 baptisms, and 7 confirmations.

With the help of the Rev. Shirley Lee, we witnessed for justice – from Memorial walks to successfully sponsoring a resolution at the Diocesan Convention calling for the Freeing of the Fairbanks Four.

We celebrated birthdays and anniversaries and lit sky lanterns and blessed prayer shawls and new altar linens and discussed health issues and ate soup and danced and sang songs and anthems and smiled and laughed and cried and were quiet.

Through the efforts of the Vestry we reached towards financial stability, with the successful establishment of Financial and Fundraising committees, and a very successful (because of YOU!) PFD Campaign

We said good bye to old friends, from former Vestrymember Clarence & Margarette Bolden, to former Senior Warden and Sexton Bruce Gadwah, and to others. We finally allowed Parish Administrator Hilary Freeman to retire, after nearly 30 years in the Church Office. The Vestry has now successfully overseen the hiring of Daisy Stevens to be the new Church Secretary; and Frank Ponziano is beginning his ministry as the new sexton.

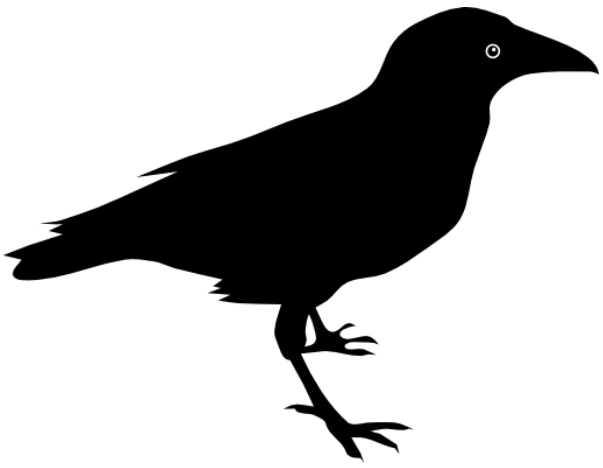
We rang bells and watched for God.

By Father Scott Fisher, St Matthew's Episcopal Church in Fairbanks, Alaska

Christmas Services at St Matthew's

For the 110th Year on This Ground

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21st - the 4th Sunday of Advent
8AM Holy Eucharist, Rite I
9:15AM Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with Choir
11:15AM Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with Choir
1:30PM Fairbanks Correctional Center Visit/Service
12AM Winter Solstice "Bang – Pots - & - Scream – To-Chase-Away-The-Great-Dragon-of Darkness" Compline Service



MONDAY, DECEMBER 22nd
5PM Advent Evening Prayer

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 23rd
10AM Altar Guild Greening of The Church
11AM Denali Center Eucharist
5PM Advent Evening Prayer

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24th – Christmas Eve
[Outside Christmas Tree Lights turned on when the Light of the 1st Star appears]
5PM Holy Eucharist, Rite II
8PM Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with Choir
10.30PM Christmas Caroling begins in the Church
11PM Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with Choir
[Special Readings & Music at all services]

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25th - The Nativity of Our Lord
11AM Christmas Day Eucharist

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28th
8AM Holy Eucharist, Rite 1
10AM Lessons & Carols, Eucharist, Rite II

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 31st
9:30AM Wednesday Morning Eucharist
11PM New Year's Eve Eucharist & Door Jumping

THURSDAY, JANUARY 1st
1PM (ish) Traditional New Year's Day Potlatch/ Covered Dish

SUNDAY, JANUARY 4th
8AM Holy Eucharist, Rite 1
10AM Lessons & Carols, Eucharist, Rite II

MONDAY, JANUARY 5th
5PM 12thNight Covered Dish & Burning of Christmas Greens

TUESDAY, JANUARY 6th
Lights on the Outside Christmas Tree turned off at Sunset

SUNDAY, JANUARY 11th
8AM Holy Eucharist, Rite I
9:15AM Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with Choir
11:15AM Holy Eucharist, Rite II, with Choir
1:30PM Fairbanks Correctional Center Visit/Service

[NOTE: Plus other events, surprises etc throughout the Time]

Epiphany morning outside St Laurence Cowley

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UB8 3NB
England
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1030 Second Avenue
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Website: stmatthewschurch.org