

# The highways to Zion

by Peter Carruthers,  
Executive Director

Pilgrimages are fashionable!

“Every major religion has seen an increase in pilgrims of between 200% and 400% in the last 20 years”. ([tinyurl.com/ruralpilgrims](http://tinyurl.com/ruralpilgrims)).

There are many reasons for this. Partly, it arises from a desire for ‘time out’, open space, closeness to nature, and connection with history as an antidote for fast, urban lifestyles.

But, for many, pilgrimage is also a spiritual quest. Resurgence of pilgrimages represent an opportunity for mission.

As John Bunyan wrote, all Christians are pilgrims, following Christ on our own journey through life, with all its encounters, insights, obstacles and blessings. And pilgrimage is to be a ‘way of blessing’: Psalm 84 tells us that those ‘whose heart is set on pilgrimage’ (sometimes translated ‘in whose heart are the highways to Zion’) are ‘blessed’, ‘go from strength to strength’ and ‘appear before God in Zion’.

This issue of Village Link explores the theme of ‘pilgrimage’ or ‘journeys’, and includes articles on the *Via Beata* and Street Prayer

projects. This is also our Winter/Christmas issue, and to help explore this theme, we are pleased to welcome seasonal articles by Abigail Carruthers and Eleanor Prince.

Alongside Brexit, environmental activism has grabbed the news headlines over the last year or so. Aware that many may be asking, ‘what does the Bible say about the future of the earth and how should Christians respond?’, the theme for next year’s Village Hope Annual Conference will be ‘Hope for the earth’. I very much hope to see you then.

Welcome to this bumper issue of Village Link, which combines Autumn and Winter editions with an interesting mixture of articles. Our prayer is that you might be inspired to reach out into your own communities in different ways that match your own calling and giftings, and that



you might be blessed by reflective articles as we draw near to the Christmas celebration.

All at Village Hope wish you a joyful Christmas time, as you celebrate the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into our world, and every blessing poured out generously from God our Father for the New Year and beyond.

**Tim Prince**

# Exile and hope

by Peter Carruthers

*In the Lord I put my trust; how can you say to my soul, "Flee as a bird to your mountain"? For look! The wicked bend their bow, they make ready their arrow on the string, that they may shoot secretly at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do? (Psalm 11: 1-3)*

Every society has foundations. Shared beliefs and values, and institutions that reflect and enact these, are the bedrock of any ordered and enduring society. In Britain, for centuries, these foundations have been 'Christian'.

This is not to say that every individual was a Christian in the sense of personal faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, it connotes a society and culture grounded in what US theologian Francis Schaeffer described as a 'biblical consensus'<sup>i</sup> and Bishop Lesslie Newbigin termed, a 'Christian plausibility structure'.<sup>ii</sup>

Fundamental British values, of the rule of law and equality of every person before the law, freedom of conscience, speech, assembly and religion, and representative democracy, all find their origin in Judaeo-Christian belief, thought and practice - all were "formed in the crucible of the Christian faith".<sup>iii</sup> And these values have been "recognised worldwide as defining our national identity,"<sup>iv</sup> and as providing the seeds of freedom and democracy in many other nations throughout the world.<sup>v</sup>

## Foundations destroyed

But Britain is no longer 'Christian'. And its foundations are crumbling.

Granted, there remain many Christian vestiges in our customs, culture, institutions and landscape (and these may be more evident in rural areas) and nearly 40% of people still describe themselves as Christian.<sup>vi</sup> But Christianity no longer

provides the nation's moral consensus. For many, it is just a heritage museum, another voice in the pluralist cacophony, or a 'lifestyle choice'. But for others, Christianity, with its truth claims, is offensive, an affront to the gods of pluralism, relativism, humanism and paganism.

We should not underestimate just how seismic and traumatic this is for many in our nation, and in other nations suffering the same loss. It is a form of bereavement and we are still in mourning.

"Do not take this lightly", wrote Francis Schaeffer (speaking of the US), "it is a horrible thing .. to look back and see my country and my culture go down the drain in my own lifetime. It is a horrible thing that 60 years ago you could move across this country and almost everyone, even non-Christians, would have known what the gospel was. A horrible thing that 50 to 60 years ago our culture was built on the Christian consensus, and now this is no longer the case."<sup>vii</sup>

And it is not just the Christian consensus that is crumbling, but the foundational social structures of marriage and family (Genesis 2:24), instituted by God for all people, and even humanity itself (Genesis 1:26-27).

As Rod Dreher put it, "despite our wealth and technological sophistication, we in the modern West are living under barbarism, though we do not recognise it. Our scientists, our judges, our princes, our scholars and our scribes are at work demolishing the faith, the family, gender, even what it means to be human. Our barbarians have exchanged the animal pelts and spears of the past for designer suits and smart phones".<sup>viii</sup>

The outcome of this is not only a 'no-longer Christian Britain', but a

'broken Britain', without order, vision or restraint (Proverbs 29:18; 2 Timothy 3:1-5).

There is a profound danger in this, made even more acute as we contemplate our present political crisis. As Schaeffer went on to warn (in his remarkably prophetic last book, published in 1984), "when the memory of the Christian consensus which gave us freedom within the biblical form is .. forgotten, a manipulating authoritarianism will .. fill the vacuum, [which] will gradually force form on society so that it will not go into chaos – and most people would accept it."<sup>ix</sup>

## Exile

The situation for Christians in Britain can be likened to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God's people to Babylon in the 6C BC. And the latter's experience, as recounted and interpreted by the prophet Jeremiah, provides powerful insights, a message of hope and an agenda for action for believers in 21C Britain.

## Insights

Our 'Babylon' is, I believe, the end of 'Christian Britain'. Just as the ancient exiles underwent the loss of temple, priesthood and worship, nation, city and monarchy, so we today are experiencing the loss of Christian privilege, power and influence, and the crumbling of church institutions and the institutions that bound church and state together. Neither circumstance arose by chance. Behind these visible states of affairs was, and is, God's hidden governance. The prophet's task, then and now, is to make this visible - to understand the lived reality of history as the arena of God's purpose and activity.<sup>x</sup>

For ancient Israel, as Jeremiah declared, destruction and exile were covenantal sanctions consequent upon repeated violation of

covenantal conditions and repeated refusal to repent (eg Deuteronomy 30:15-20). The people were the authors of their own demise.

We may be wary of drawing too close a parallel between their situation and ours. But Christians in Britain need to ponder deeply on the causes of our own crisis, and our, and our predecessors', role in bringing it about. Judgement, after all, begins with 'the household of God' (1 Peter 4:17). One alternative translation of Psalm 11:3, quoted above, is, 'if the foundations are destroyed, *what have the righteous done?*'!

### Hope

Yet, in God's economy, judgement and mercy walk hand-in-hand. Beyond destruction and exile is a 'future and a hope' (Jeremiah 29:11).

Then and now, the foundation of hope is that 'God is sovereign'. He is the maker of all things, the King of the nations; nothing is too difficult for Him (Jeremiah 10:6-16; 27:5; 32:17). In Psalm 11, the answer to the question, 'if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?' (v 3), is an affirmation of trust (v 1) in the Lord who reigns from heaven (v 4).

And the sovereign God has plans for His people (Jeremiah 29:11), specifically for His faithful remnant (eg Jeremiah 23:3, 31:7), no longer centred around the institutions of Temple and monarchy, but around family and community, Sabbath and synagogue, with God's Word at the centre.<sup>xi</sup> In the exile, "we can see the transition to a remnant community with a hope commensurate with modest political ambitions and deep commitments to the Torah".<sup>xii</sup>

Likewise, our future as Christians in Britain is also as a faithful remnant, not dependent on institutions of church and state, but as communities characterised by radical discipleship, loving fellowship, humble service, and reaching the lost, with close

attentiveness to the word of God. The latter is particularly significant: we have played fast and loose with truth, and need to return to His word.

### Action

What, then, should the righteous do?

We should not spend too much time looking back or pinning our hopes on reversing the trends of decades and saving 'Christian Britain'. Like the Jews of the 6C BC, we need to accept exile. The 'good figs' (Jeremiah 24:1-10), those who 'chose life' (Jeremiah 21:8-9), were, contrary to prevailing opinion, the ones who surrendered and went to Babylon. Our situation in post-Christian Britain requires the "abandonment of the reversal model and the embracing of a dispersal or *diaspora* mission agenda such as we find in the book of Acts".<sup>xiii</sup>

This is, after all, what Jesus prepared His disciples for. His Kingdom is not of this world, and we are not to use the world's methodology (John 18:36), but rather to be a counter current, shining as lights in the world's darkness (Matthew 5:14-16). He warned of the world's hostility (Matthew 10:22) and trouble (John 16:33), but commanded us to go into all the world and preach the gospel and make disciples (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19).

We should not spend too much time

looking forward, whether in expectation of revival any time soon or speculating about the end times. Although Jeremiah made clear God's intention to restore Israel to the land in the future and to judge the nations, their priority was to concentrate on living faithfully in Babylon for the present (Jeremiah 29:4-11). Similarly, our ultimate hope is in Jesus' return, our redemption, and final judgement, and He expects us to understand world events in the light of Scripture and be watchful and ready for His return (Matthew 24:3-44; Mark 13:2-37). But the faithful and wise servant is the one who is busy looking after the household when the master returns (Matthew 24:45-47).

As above, this means accepting our changed status and living out our calling as a faithful remnant. But, as for the ancient exiles, it also means getting on with everyday life, securing the next generation, and working and praying for the peace and wellbeing of our nation and its leaders (Jeremiah 29:5-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-4).

*The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face. (Psalm 11:4-5, 7)*

<sup>i</sup> Schaeffer, F A. 1984. The great evangelical disaster. Illinois: Crossway Books.

<sup>ii</sup> Newbigin, L. 1989. The Gospel in a pluralist society. London: SPCK.

<sup>iii</sup> Nazir-Ali, M. 2008. Breaking faith with Britain. Standpoint Magazine, [tinyurl.com/standpointna](https://tinyurl.com/standpointna)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/britishchristian>.

<sup>v</sup> Hannan, D. 2013. How we invented freedom and why it matters. London: Head of Zeus.

<sup>vi</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/bsasreligion>

<sup>vii</sup> Schaeffer, 1984. Op cit, p 29.

<sup>viii</sup> Dreher, R. 2017 The Benedict Option, p 17. New York: Sentinel.

<sup>ix</sup> Schaeffer, 1984. Op cit, p 23.

<sup>x</sup> Breuggemann, W. 2011 The theology of the book of Jeremiah. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>xi</sup> Hill, C & M. 2016. Living in Babylon. Handsel Press.

<sup>xii</sup> Breuggemann, 2011 Op cit, p 129.

<sup>xiii</sup> Greene, C & Robinson, M. 2008. Metavista. Milton Keynes: Authentic Media.



# The way of blessing

by Peter Carruthers

## The *Via Beata*

Some months ago, a friend introduced me to the *Via Beata*, the 'way of blessing' ([viabeata.co.uk](http://viabeata.co.uk)). The *Via Beata* is a new pilgrim trail from Lowestoft to St David's - the easternmost and westernmost points of Great Britain. The trail is interspersed with way-stations, consisting of biblically themed sculptures, sometimes inside wooden shelters. My friend had recently been part of a group that had walked the section of the trail in their own county, stopping to pray at each way-station.

I was intrigued, and visited the website. I was pleased to discover some 'Village Hope connections'. One of the way-stations is at Grace Fellowship Baptist Church, which is pastored by Village Hope Associate, Eric Gren. Another is at Little Gidding, a village next door to Great Gidding, the location of Eric's other church. Little Gidding is also the subject of two articles on the Village Hope blog ([tinyurl.com/vhlg1](http://tinyurl.com/vhlg1); [tinyurl.com/vhlg2](http://tinyurl.com/vhlg2)).

I made contact with the *Via Beata*'s founder, Steve Eggleton, a sculptor, wood-carver, designer and writer. And, in September, Steve and his wife, Gill, visited us en route to St David's and I was able to ask him more about this unique project.

## A personal pilgrimage

My first question concerned the beginnings of the project - what had led Steve to develop the *Via Beata*?

It was soon clear that, like the trail itself, the *Via Beata* has been for Steve a 'pilgrimage' with several 'way-stations'. Through these, the Lord formed the vision that is now becoming a reality.

In 2000, Steve visited the 'Seeing Salvation' exhibition at the National Gallery - depictions of Jesus Christ from the 3rd to the 20th Century - and was moved, not only by the exhibits, but also by the reverence evident in

many of those viewing them. It prompted him to realise that art can reach some people in ways that words cannot, and that he, as an artist himself, could be part of making that happen.

A couple of years later, Steve designed a memorial pavilion for a cemetery in Hampshire. This consisted of eight relief carvings that speak of hope in Christ. Many people lingered at the site and contemplated and were touched by its message. This prompted him to pray that there would be more such installations around the country.



A further impetus came in 2005 when Steve was designing a sculpture trail for a country park in North Wales and glimpsed the possibility of something bigger.

These incidents built up a longing to do something specific with his own artistic gifts to touch the people of Britain with God's love and God's word.

Then, one morning in church, in 2006, the preacher asked everyone to write a short personal 'mission statement'. Immediately, Steve wrote 'through creativity, blessing'. And he felt the Lord showing him a straight line across Great Britain at its widest point, with art-works that spoke of Him stretching

away into the distance.

Nevertheless, it was another two years, and a further prompt in church, when the preacher urged the congregation to 'seize the day', before Steve took steps to make this vision a reality.

## The vision confirmed

Conscious that the Lord does not, as a rule, expect us to do His work alone, but has called us into a many-membered body, Steve's next step was to write to about twenty friends asking them to pray and seek God's guidance regarding his emerging vision.

Two days after mailing these letters, a person in a meeting had a picture of a piece of wood coming in on the tide and someone taking it up and carving it. Steve realised that the Lord was speaking to him. This was confirmed, as many of his friends wrote back encouraging him to press on with the plan he believed the Lord had revealed to him.

Further confirmation was provided when he drew a straight line on a map from Lowestoft to St David's and discovered that the line went right through his own garden! In 2009, this became the site of the first way-station.

Since then, a further seventeen way-stations have been installed and fourteen more are in progress. And a community has formed around the project, including other artists and craftsmen, those identifying way-station locations and liaising with local believers, local churches hosting way-stations, and some simply walking and praying along the trail.

## Rural blessings

A particularly significant aspect of the *Via Beata* is that nearly all the existing and planned way-stations are in villages, rather than towns or cities. I was, therefore, very interested to

know, 'how has the establishment of these impacted and blessed people and churches in rural areas?'

As Steve and his team have travelled the *Via Beata* route, they have encountered many small rural churches and met many leaders who are struggling or feel isolated, and listened to their concerns and prayed with them. Shortly after returning from their recent trip to St David's, several church leaders in the villages they had visited on the way (in Wales, Worcestershire and Warwickshire) wrote, speaking of how they were encouraged and inspired by the visit and the *Via Beata* vision.

The project has been most effective, however, where local people have got involved in making the art-work for their village. This has provided opportunities for workshop weekends, which usually include a church service of one sort or another. And when the work is complete, there is a service of blessing to commission the way-station.

For example, at the village of Bluntisham in Cambridgeshire, a carving workshop weekend in the

There are also many individuals who use the way-stations regularly as places to be quiet, some of whom are happy to have local Christians speak and pray with them.

### Reflections

As I reflected on the story of the *Via Beata*, several themes emerged, which may provide signposts on each of our own journeys and in our journey together as God's 'pilgrim people'.

**'An idea whose time has come'**. Not all Christian initiatives are an 'idea whose time has come', but the *Via Beata* clearly is. And, as Victor Hugo wrote, 'no one can resist an idea whose time has come'<sup>i</sup>. For believers, this means, seeking to discern what God is initiating and blessing, 'seeing what the Father is doing, and doing likewise', as did Jesus Himself (John 5:19).

**'Through creativity, blessing'**. Not everyone responds readily to arguments and propositions. Beauty (and goodness) can touch people when words fail. Creative expression and good people are an essential apologetic for our faith and a signpost to lead people to Jesus. Out of

all of us are artists, but we all have God-given gifts, which we are to use to worship and serve Him and others. In the final account, it is what we have done with the talents the Lord has given us that matters (Matthew 25:14-30). For individuals, this means discovering our gifts and calling and seeking to find ways to deploy them. For church leaders, this means recognising people's gifts and creating contexts and platforms for them to be expressed and used.

**'Between the way-stations'**. The account above has necessarily majored on the way-stations, as the central focus of the vision that the Lord revealed to Steve and which he has taken forward. However, for those walking and praying the trail, most of the time is spent between the way-stations, amidst the beauty of God's creation in the British countryside. As well as well-attested therapeutic benefits of outdoor exercise, God's creation expresses God's glory (Psalm 19) and His 'eternal power and Godhead' (Romans 1:20).

**'Pilgrims on the earth'**. Finally, the *Via Beata* reminds us that we are all 'pilgrims on the earth' on a journey to a 'better, that is, a heavenly country', to the 'city God has prepared' for us (Hebrews 11:13-16). And through all the twists and turns and ups and downs, with Jesus alongside us always (Matthew 28:20), and the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us (Hebrews 12:1), that way is surely a 'way of blessing' for all who follow it.

*Blessed is the man whose strength is in You, whose heart is set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a spring; The rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion. (Psalm 84:5-7).*

<sup>i</sup>Literally, 'one cannot resist the invasion of ideas' ('on ne résiste pas à l'invasion des idées')

***If you would like to know more or get involved in the Via Beata, then visit the website at [viabeata.co.uk](http://viabeata.co.uk) or contact Steve at [steve@ViaBeata.co.uk](mailto:steve@ViaBeata.co.uk).***



### Way-station at Little Stukeley

church room included a Sunday morning cafe-church outreach attended by several local families. A second weekend, a month later, when the figures made during the first weekend were painted, involved many more local people, some of whom had never attended the church before. And a service at the end to commission the way-station was packed, and provided a great opportunity to preach the gospel. The local church now plans further follow-up.

concern to avoid any hint of the worship of images, evangelical churches have tended to focus on words alone and stripped worship and church life of any visual art and creativity. In doing so, maybe we have thrown out the baby with the bath water?

**'Using our gifts'**. A central theme in Steve's story above is how the Lord made it possible for him to use his artistic gifts for the Lord's work. Not

# Street prayer

by Marcus Roberts

***Earlier this year I met with Marcus Roberts. Marcus is the founder and leader of 'Street Prayer' (streetprayer.org), an initiative that started in Oxford, but is now seeking to reach out into the villages of Oxfordshire, and to towns and villages beyond. Marcus is also a leader of Rivers of Life Church in Oxford (riversoflife.co.uk). Here he tells the story of Street Prayer. (Peter Carruthers)***

'Heart-warming' best describes our first prayer breakfast in our street! People we had passed on our street for years without knowing them were now singing and praying together with us.

My family moved to Oxford in 1995. We soon got to know a Christian family living opposite, but it was not until 2007 that it occurred to us to visit everyone on our street (of about a hundred homes) and invite them to a prayer breakfast.

So three teams of two called on each home. The response was surprisingly positive. Most people we visited said it was a good idea. About a quarter said they would come, and on the day

• "Why hadn't we done this before?!"

• "It's a really good opportunity that we have as Christians to be together as one Church."

• "I live on my own. I love people and company. I also like singing hymns, so I enjoy it very much. I'm very pleased they knocked on my door that morning."

• "I never really used to say hello to that many neighbours, except for my immediate ones, but now I know lots of people on the street."

## **Big Breakfast Day 2010**

Three years on, and word had got around as to what was happening

of that month. About fifty attended, and on the 'big breakfast day', over twenty groups met around the city (see [tinyurl.com/streetprayer](http://tinyurl.com/streetprayer)).

In the years since then, our team was small. We held breakfasts for the whole of Marston three or four times a year, and new residents often came. Several overseas visitors to the UK turned up out of curiosity. "It's the first time we have had a meal with English people", some said. A few of them attended bible studies, came to Jesus and were baptised. There were also one-off breakfasts in another area of Oxford and in the village of Eynsham. We believe they were fruitful in joining neighbours together and encouraging people to congregate locally.

## **A new direction**

In 2018 we embarked on a new journey, which we hope will help expand the movement. Our main aim now is to work and pray such that the Lord will raise up workers in each area that an event is held.

It is not our desire that Street Prayer become a big organisation. Rather we want to be a catalyst to encourage believers everywhere to put on events and invite their neighbours for a meal, prayer and singing.

We planned a breakfast around a household in an area of Oxford called Rose Hill. We visited as many homes as possible, getting to know neighbours and inviting them to come. The Methodist Church, which owns the only



**Prayer breakfast Rose Hill, Oxford 2019**

we were twenty people. Warm friendships were formed; others were added later.

From then on we prayed together every month for our street and area. During that first year, we also had a meal together every month that year, with people from neighbouring streets joining in. Here are some comments from those who came:

in Marston, our area of Oxford. Church leaders from across the city of Oxford designated a day to encourage Christians to invite their neighbours to a breakfast.

Those who were inspired to host a breakfast in their street joined church leaders (and the Lord Mayor) on a snowy Saturday morning in January 2010, to pray for an event to be held at the end





Christian building in the area, provided the venue. About 40 people came, and from that number the Lord raised up a team who would take on the work in Rose Hill.

In 2019 the team held a breakfast in the new Rose Hill Community Centre, having visited many of the homes which showed interest the previous year and many more beyond. About 50 people attended; several of whom did not go to any church.

As a follow-up one of the Rose Hill team put on a barbecue at his home and invited his neighbours; nearly half of the 20 who came were not yet believers. A young couple next door who had just moved in came, and when it rained we used their verandah! The Rose Hill team are now praying about how to follow that up and for what event to put on next.

### World Street Prayer Day 2020

We are now looking forward to and planning a 'world street prayer day' on Saturday 9 May 2020. This is a day for Christians everywhere to put on an event and invite their neighbours to eat, pray and sing together. Whether you are in a city, a town, a village or a hamlet, please consider joining in and making it a day of feasting and joy for Christians everywhere!

Putting on just one event like this and visiting your neighbours, can help find out who are believers in your street or area and from then on, form friendships, pray and encourage one another.

### The challenge

Jesus tells us to love one another with brotherly love. We do not choose our brothers and sisters in the faith: God does! It is a great blessing and a challenge to learn to love those believers that the Lord has given us as neighbours. Jesus prayed: "That they all may be one, so that the world might believe." Our unity in a congregation miles away is not going to influence our neighbourhood, but developing our love and unity with believers on our street or in our village will be noticed by all.



***If you are interested in putting on an event in your street or village or would just like to know more, visit the Street Prayer website at [streetprayer.org](http://streetprayer.org) or contact Marcus at [info@streetprayer.org](mailto:info@streetprayer.org). And if you do run an event, both the Street Prayer and Village Hope teams would very much like to know and hear your testimonies.***

## Percy Tyler



It has been pointed out that the second leader of FEB was omitted from the list on the back page of the Centenary Celebration pull-out sent with the previous edition of Village Link. We apologise for this error. Percy Tyler, with his wife Dorothy, took over leadership from George Fox, and they led the work until Arthur and Bessie Bryers succeeded them. He was part of the Band from the earliest days, and was instrumental in moving the work in the direction of the villages and in opening up the work in Ireland.

His words to those seeking a calling to witness in the villages still speak to us today. "Be sure of this, the Spirit of God always calls hearts to rest. If you have not got rest in your heart, do not move; and then don't move until He gives you His Word; for there will come a time, in village life at least, when you have nothing else to stand upon but the Word of God which abideth for ever."



# The wonder of the seasons

by Abigail Carruthers

Images: Abigail Anastasia Photography

**As the nights draw in, and the days get colder, we may not be looking forward to a long, cold winter. But the changing seasons are important. They always have been, and always will be; as God promised, “while the earth remains, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Genesis 8:22).**

In a busy, changing world, perhaps the seasons are needed as something eternal. Having cold weather means we look forward to warmer weather. As C S Lewis writes, in *The Screwtape Letters*, “He gives them the seasons, each season different yet every year the same, so that spring is always felt as a novelty yet always as the recurrence of an immemorial theme.”

This colder weather, and seemingly constant rain, makes us want to spend little time outdoors. But, take time to observe God’s creation at this time of year. Changes are happening in nature. The theme of ‘journeys’ in this issue reminds us that the swallows have long gone, having departed on the the long, difficult journey to warmer climes in Africa. Puffins,

who spend just five months of the year in summer on land to breed, are now spending the winter bobbing around, far out at sea. At the first outlook, nature may not seem organised, but there is order and logic. Trees lose leaves at the right time in order to conserve water and energy over winter. Hedgehogs hibernate because

food is scarce.

The trees are beautiful at this time of year, with every leaf a different colour. Nature just shouts out how amazing God is - “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). As a biologist, the more I research and





read, the more astonishing I find God's creation to be. For example, the worsening weather and decreasing light is detected by



trees, which use hormones to trigger leaf fall.

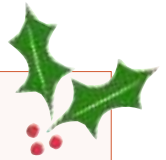
However, just at the moment, the fields look a bit dull and tired, and the sky is always grey. But there is lots to look forward to. I love those beautiful winter mornings, crisp, cold, frosty and sunny. The sun's rays glisten on the frost after a beautiful sunrise. They are the sort of mornings when you want to be out for a walk. Everywhere you turn there is something new to see: the reflection of the sun in the



frosted spiders' webs; when you look at dead leaves on the ground close up, and see actually how pretty they are!

So, take time to observe, watch and just be in God's creation. It is amazing what you see if you take that time to stop. You may have times of doubting God, and if this happens, take a look at His creation.

*"Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." (Acts 14:17).*



## Christmas Quiz

1. Which two tribes of Israel have 'seen a great light' (Isaiah 9)?
2. Of which tribes of Israel were Zechariah & Elizabeth, Joseph & Mary and Anna?
3. In Jesus' genealogy in Matthew, five women are listed. One is Mary. Who are the other four, and what is special about them?
4. According to the Gospels, which four places did Jesus live in or visit during his childhood?
5. How many dreams are mentioned in Matthew's account of the Nativity and who had them?
6. Where is Peter Paul Rubens' painting of the Adoration of the Magi?
7. When (day & month) did Good King Wenceslas 'look out'?
8. Which city has a square named after Good King Wenceslas?
9. How does Good King Wenceslas like his pizza?
10. Where's the connection between the carol, While Shepherd's Watched, and King Alfred?
11. What is ignited at the end of this year's John Lewis Christmas video?
12. In which year did Christmas day become a public holiday in Scotland? 1745, 1871, 1928, 1958, 1965 or 1974?

### Answers:

1. Zebulun and Naphtali; 2. Levi, Judah, Asher; 3. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba; all were Gentiles; 4. Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth, Jerusalem; 5. Four - Joseph had three, the wise men had one; 6. Kings College Chapel, Cambridge; 7. 26th December; 8. Prague; 9. Deep-pan, crisp and even; 10. Winchester, the carol is usually sung to Old Winchester, King Alfred is buried in Winchester; 11. A Christmas pudding; 12. 1871.

# God's transforming gift

by Eleanor Prince

**I admit it, I am one of those people who will be playing Christmas music in October, watching Christmas films in September and planning people's Christmas presents throughout the summer. I just love Christmas and everything that comes with it; the frosty mornings, the food, the decorations and songs being played in every shop up the sparkly lit high street.**

We know that it can be so easy to be distracted from why we actually celebrate this holiday, but the Christian message is still evident in so many of our favourite films, stories and traditions. My favourite Christmas book, Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol', tells the story of how a grumpy, selfish, old man who hates

Christmas and cares nothing for the poor, transforms to become a loving, generous and good man.

On Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by his late business partner's ghost who is weighed down by the chains of greed, and warns Scrooge to change his own life or he will suffer the same consequences. Three ghosts then visit Scrooge throughout the night to help him understand his wrongdoings and influence him to change his ways. The Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge back to his childhood to remind him of his innocence, his loneliness, his first Christmas party and later on in life when his fiancée ended their relationship because of his greater love for money. The Ghost of

Christmas Present sends him to a family meal he recently refused an invitation to, where Scrooge discovers the youngest is seriously ill. Finally, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge's death and the lack of sympathy from others for his passing.

Utterly moved by the three different perspectives of Christmas, Scrooge wakes up on Christmas morning and vows to be a good man, be generous to the poor and look after his family. This story carries the Christian message that even the worst sinner can repent and be saved. As we know, the reason we celebrate Christmas is because Jesus was born to save us and those like Scrooge.

As a young person in today's society, I have come across many 'pre-transformed Scrooges' who no longer believe that the Christmas story is relevant and that Christmas should now line up much more with the views of today's secular society.

In fact, there is a 'Scrooge' in the Bible, Zacchaeus the tax collector. After being noticed and called down from the tree, Jesus stayed in his house and Zacchaeus chose to change his ways and give half his possessions to the poor and four times to amount back to anyone he cheated.

Our God is so generous that he gave us his one and only son, and something we can hold onto, despite what society says, is that we have been saved and in the 'Yet to Come', he will be back again.

*"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Luke 19:10*





# The Christmas angel

A story based on  
real events

by Tim Prince

It was the night before Christmas, but rather than peaceful expectation, my mind was a whirl. I had just about wrapped up everything at the office after lunch and caught the end of the office party downstairs. There were a few last minute presents to buy, and I dashed around town concentrating completely on fulfilling my shopping list. Then I hurriedly packed my suitcase for a short family Christmas get-together, but couldn't quite decide if I had stuffed enough shirts in or had remembered my toothbrush.

My destination was many miles away, and to make matters worse the weather forecast was deteriorating every time I checked it. The motorway would be jammed with commuters racing home, and late December meant that most of the journey would be made in darkness.

I don't need to describe the details of the drive. Suffice it to say that, when my junction finally rolled into sight, I heaved a huge sigh of relief and pulled off down the slip road. The traffic subsided and I found myself on a quiet road heading out into the darkness of the countryside.

Then the snow began to fall. At first it drifted lazily down, the perfect accompaniment to Christmas, but it quickly gathered in intensity until, just ten minutes after leaving the lights of the motorway, I found myself wishing I was back under their neon glare. My speed dropped and my fingers tightened around the steering wheel as the conditions worsened, and realisation slowly dawned that I wouldn't make it in

time for the roast goose that traditionally marked the occasion.

As the journey draws to a close, the ground rises into some low hills and the roads narrow until, in some stretches, they become single track with passing places. As I unwillingly applied more pressure to the accelerator to climb into the hills, I realised that it had been snowing up there for a long time, because the roads became white and the verges were mounded with snow spattered by mud from passing vehicles. The car lost its grip several times, and I began reluctantly to wonder whether to give up completely.

As it was, my decision was made for me. I drove hesitantly into a dip lined with high hedges, and as I tried to come out the other side, my wheels span and I slid wearily backwards. My desperate attempts to struggle out just seemed to make matters worse.

The car settled for the last time in its icy cradle and I smacked the steering wheel in frustration. Why would anybody in their right mind travel at such a stupid time, anyway? I closed my eyes, hung my head, and breathed slowly and purposefully to regain my composure.

Quite unexpectedly there was a sudden knock on my window. Surprised, I lowered the window and felt a blast of cold air invading the warm interior. A man was standing outside, dressed in a large coat and hood that virtually covered his face, except for a pair of eyes and a bushy beard and moustache.

"Stick it in second gear, add some gas, and let the clutch off slowly like," he said with a slight country accent. "I'll give a shove from behind."

Before I could reply he disappeared around the back, so I raised the window and set the car as he had suggested, but I knew it wouldn't work following the mess I'd made earlier trying to extricate myself. I couldn't see him out of the rear window to coordinate our efforts, so I just lifted the clutch and waited for the wheels to spin.

To my amazement the car moved slowly but effortlessly forward. Any second I thought that the conditions would reassert themselves but I climbed steadily to the top of the rise. Filled with gratitude I got out of the car to thank my rescuer, but as I walked to the rear, the smile died on my lips. The road was completely empty.

For a moment I tried to grasp where he had gone, but both behind and in front were clear, and the hedges were impenetrably thick and thorny. Stunned, I got back behind the wheel and carefully continued my journey. My mind raced, but it was not filled with the same concerns as before. Slowly and inexorably I realised that, just as two thousand years ago God had sent messengers to speak to the shepherds out in the fields, so He had graciously reached down to me in my seasonal ignorance of Him and sent His angel to shake me awake.

# Christmas letter bank

Use the letters from each clue to make a Biblical phrase from the Christmas story (NIV translation - beware on numbers 3 and 7). You can use each letter any number of times. All the letters will be used at least once.

This is a difficult puzzle. To help you, there are two clues for each phrase. The first shows how many letters are in each word, and how many words are in the phrase. The second is the Bible verse where the phrase is found. If you can solve it without using the second clue, you are doing well!

Example: daft leghorn	2,5,2,3,4	Matt 2:13
Answer: An angel of the Lord		
1. hearts win	2,3,3,4,2,3,4	Matt 2:2
2. vestal whipcord	7,4,3,5,5,3,5,3	Matt 2:9
3. goldfinches army	2,4,3,2,7,3,2,5	Matt 2:11
4. earthbound icy	4,8,2,5,7,2,7,5	Matt 2:12
5. wild boatmen VHF	2,9,2,4,2,5	Luke 2: 4
6. atheism frown	5,3,2,4,3,4,2,3,3	Luke 2: 7
7. fact proving whelks	7,5,4,5,6,2,5	Luke 2: 8
8. wafted joys burying	1,5,3,4,4,2,5,3	Luke 2: 10
9. buoyant shiver	1,7,3,4,4,2,3	Luke 2: 11
10. thorny delights	5,2,3,2,3,7	Luke 2:14

## Answers

1. We saw his star in the east 2. Stopped over the place where the child was 3. Of gold and of incense and of myrrh 4. They returned to their country by another route 5. To Bethlehem the town of David 6. There was no room for them in the inn 7. Keeping watch over their flocks at night 8. I bring you good news of great joy 9. A saviour has been born to you 10. Glory to God in the highest

## Giving to Village Hope

Hitherto, we have offered Village Link free of charge, and we would like to continue to do so. However, as we are sure you will understand, publishing Village Link incurs costs of printing and postage, as well as appreciable staff time.

Please will you consider giving towards the costs of producing this magazine and towards the wider work of Village Hope. You can give by cheque or via BACS using the enclosed form. If you

are a tax payer and you complete the Gift Aid declaration this will enable us to claim an additional 25p for every £1 you donate.

One-off or occasional gifts are much appreciated, but please consider becoming a 'Village Hope Seed Sower'. Seed Sowers share in our ministry through regular giving, and this will enable us to extend Village Hope's work of mobilising prayer, advancing understanding and supporting and strengthening churches in rural Britain.

Join our mailing list to receive future issues of Village Link. Just contact us at the address below, email us at [info@villagehope.org.uk](mailto:info@villagehope.org.uk), or call 01432 850071 giving us your name, address, and email and we will send you a welcome pack.

## Village Hope Annual Conference

17 to 19 April 2020

### 'Hope for the earth' 'Creation, countryside, land and farming'

Elim Conference Centre,  
West Malvern, Worcestershire.

Save the date, it would be  
great to see you there.

Registration forms available in  
the new year.

## About Village Hope

Village Hope is a Christian charity with a remit for churches and communities in rural Britain.

Our charitable purpose is "to proclaim and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the villages of Britain, in order to establish effective Christian witness, and to encourage and enable Bible teaching, prayer, worship and evangelism in village churches".

We believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope to all humanity, for this life and the life to come, and that the Bible both sets forth the way of salvation through faith in Jesus and offers a way to live and a coherent vision and timeless values for society. Village Hope is a member of the Evangelical Alliance, and its staff and trustees affirm the Alliance's Basis of Faith.

We also believe that Christians, especially those who live in rural areas, have a special privilege and responsibility as stewards of God's creation to celebrate and care for His land and His earth, which He created and sustains.

Our objective is to encourage, strengthen, support and resource those who seek to live a Christian life, serve their communities, and witness to the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Britain's villages.