



# **ST JOHN'S HOLLINGTON** **WITH** **ST PETER & ST PAUL**

Greetings,

November is just around the corner and already I can feel Christmas beginning to take up more and more space in my head, not least because we have just published all our Christmas services and events on our parish website (read on for more information).

However, with all the impending festivities and joy of Christmas, it's been a sad week for our parish as St John's was broken into on Saturday night. Mercifully, not much was taken (a few boxes of food donations), but this comes after a spate of vandalism these last few weeks with several of our external bollard lamps having been knocked over, and this latest event has caused significant damage to the front door. Please pray especially for those that have committed these nonsensical acts, and for our community as we seek to repair the damage done and step up our security measures. Please also be vigilant and get in touch if you happen to be in the area and you notice anything suspicious.

Besides that, life ticks on in the parish as we continue to meet together as two church families, united in our vision to work, pray, and hope with Jesus.

Here's what's in the spotlight for today's newsletter:

- Services in November
- Christmas!
- The Parish Passions Project & data audit
- Reflection: Everything is Hallowed



## **Christmas is a comin'!**

As mentioned, we have now published all of our Christmas events and services on our website. There's lots on in the parish this year from Christmas tree festivals, to Christingles, to "Blue Christmas" services and much more. Be sure to take a look and make a note in your calendar.

Visit [www.stjohnswithpandp.org/christmas](http://www.stjohnswithpandp.org/christmas) to see what's on in the Parish this Christmas.

I'd love to draw your attention to our Community Carol Services in particular. We have two this year:

- St John's Carol Service is on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> December from 16:00-17:00 (+refreshments after)
- St Peter & St Paul's Carol Service is on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> December from 15:00-16:00 (+refreshments after).

We will of course be singing some of the best loved Christmas carols, as well as celebrating the joyous mystery of Christmas, and the birth of Jesus our "Emmanuel" - God with us. After the services we'll be serving up a few festive treats too.

These are the perfect services to bring family and friends along to, who could you invite?



## Parish Passions Project

The Parish Passions Project continues, and will do until I've had at least a 50% response rate (so far it's about 10%). I may sound like a broken record, but I'd love to a) capture the correct details for you so we have everything stored safely and correctly, and b) find out how we can help you to unlock your passions in giving and service. As promised, paper versions will be available soon for those that would prefer to fill out a physical form – but if you could try the digital form it creates a lot less work and is far more secure. Thanks again to all those that have participated thus far, and thank you in advance to those that will off the back of this prompt.

Please click [here](#) to fill out the form.



## Services in November

The quiet before the storm of Christmas, November still has much to offer:

- Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> – All Saints Day with Holy Communion at both churches.
- Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> – Remembrance Sunday service, remembering those who gave their lives in service to this country.
- Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> – Services as usual, with safeguarding Sunday at P&P.
- Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> – Christ the King – the last Sunday of the church year, and the final Sunday before the start of Advent – and safeguarding Sunday at St John's.
- Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> – it's a fifth Sunday, and it's the start of Advent, so we'll gather as one parish community for a joint service followed by lunch and a time of fellowship together. This is due to be held at St John's, however, the venue might change to P&P depending on how quickly we can get the front door of St John's repaired. I will update you as soon as we have a clearer idea on this.

That's all for now, but do read on for a short reflection and a prayer.



Grace & Peace,  
Toby

**Rev'd Tobias Lancaster**

Priest-in-charge | St John's Hollington with St Peter & St Paul Parkstone Road



## Reflection: Everything is hallowed

Friday is Halloween, an increasingly Americanised holiday in the British calendar, now regularly featuring carved pumpkins, trick-or-treaters, and all manner of creative fancy dress from ghouls to ghosts, devils to demons, and monsters to murderers.

Last week I took the Year 7 welcome Eucharist at Ark Alexandra Academy, the local CofE secondary school in the parish. After the service I made sure we had enough time for questions, which quickly became something of a “Grill a priest” exercise. I was amazed at the profundity of the questions coming from this 120-strong group of 11–12-year-olds. Going straight for the jugular they asked questions like, “*Why did Jesus die?*”, “*Who wrote the Bible?*”, “*If Jesus is God then why didn't he just come as an adult, why come as a baby?*” Evidently, one student had this Friday's celebrations in mind when she asked, “*Do Christians celebrate Halloween?*” Celebrate it? We practically invented it!

“All Hallow's Eve” as it's traditionally known, kicks off a triduum of Christian festivals with a vigil the evening before *All Hallow's Day*, aka *All Saints Day* – celebrating “the Saints” – and ending with *All Soul's Day* in which we remember all “the faithful departed” (though I always think this sounds rather drab, which is why I prefer how Latin American Catholics celebrate *Día De Los Muertos* – the day of the dead – with their fantastically colourful flower displays and *calaveras*). The vigil on the evening before *All Saints* has some murky origins in Celtic spirituality (possibly connected to the pagan festival *Samhain* – marking the end of the Harvest season, and the beginning of winter, though the actual origins are somewhat ambiguous) and especially the concept of “thin places.”

In her book of the same name, Northern Irish author Kerri ní Dochartaigh, describes “thin places” like this:

“Heaven and earth, the Celtic saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter. *They are places that make us feel something larger than ourselves, as though we are held in a place between worlds, beyond experience.*”

“Thin places” are based on the notion that certain geographical areas or times of year are in effect “closer to heaven.” I like this idea, and I’ve certainly experienced something like it. There are spots in creation where we might feel “held in a place between worlds”; ancient woodlands perhaps, or vast oceans, great peaks, beautiful sunrises, and haunting dusks (give me Glen Coe in the Highlands anytime). Churches are also often “thin places” that are “beyond experience.” Ecclesiastical architecture is designed to make you feel that way. For me, that’s Cologne Cathedral with its almost rocket-like structure stretching up so high it’s as if you’re being dragged heavenward; or Barcelona’s infamous architectural-smorgasbord *Basílica de la Sagrada Família* which feels like stepping into the “new creation” promised in the book of Revelation.

There is some Scriptural warrant for the idea of a “thin place” too. Take for example the various monuments erected where one of the Biblical Patriarchs encountered God, or the various Holy sites on the Sinai Peninsula, or even the very idea of the Temple in Jerusalem itself, “God’s dwelling place on earth.” These “thin places” have been good business for Christians for centuries, and we might frown at this idea, but I think our sterile post-enlightenment world needs a little more enchantment and magic, so I welcome some of the more folkish traditions.

However, while I like the idea that some places are inherently more magical in the way that they instil in us a sense of awe and wonderment or make us feel more connected to the divine presence, as a Christian who believes in the Lordship of Christ over all things and that all creation is made “through Him and for Him” (Colossians 1:16), every place and time is pregnant with the presence of God. Jesus has placed “all things under his feet” (Ephesians 1:22), he has made all of creation and every human heart His temple. In the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, God has *hallowed* every bit of space and time, so that there is not one place where He cannot be found; even and especially in the darkest and unholyest of places.

Perhaps one of the most profound “thin place” experiences I have had was in a hole underground beneath the church of *San Giuseppe dei Falegnami* in Rome. This hole was an oubliette – the dungeon of the Mamertine Prison – and the supposed spot of St Paul’s incarceration prior to his execution. It is not an especially pleasant space even now for a 21<sup>st</sup> century pilgrim like me, but it would have been far worse for the Apostle and those like him who were kept there chained up in harsh conditions under guard. But as I stood there with my fellow pilgrims singing hymns into the gloom, I couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of the presence of God.

St Paul’s witness was that God in Christ is not absent from the darkest, bleakest, most despairing places of our world. In fact, if there’s one place we Christians can almost guarantee God is to be found, it is in those places that are most dark. After all, Christ is “the light that shines in the darkness” (cf. John 1). God is there in the rubble of Gaza and Ukraine. God is there in the bitter civil conflicts around the world from Sudan to Syria, and Myanmar to Yemen. God is not afraid of the real-life ghouls, ghosts, devils, demons, monsters and murderers that we corrupted human beings have conjured up and created throughout the world with our greed and lust for violence and domination.

And we can be assured that God is in those places, because of the one place in history where God was most fully revealed – arguably the “thinnest place” of all was when God was pinned up on a cross, between two criminals, on a hilltop outside Jerusalem nicknamed ‘the Skull’ – how very “Halloween”!

The Cross is very good news for those of us who are perhaps feeling the weight of the world this *All Hallow's Eve*. Perhaps we feel it even closer to home, within our families, our relationships, our workplaces, our homes, or even in the depths of our own hearts. But it's good news because God is there – Christ the wounded healer is there – quietly and powerfully working to restore and redeem all things, undoing all the darkness of the world. To paraphrase the brave Hobbit Samwise Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings*, God is at work “making everything sad come untrue”. That's why, as a Christian, no matter how bleak things may get, I can always have hope.

**The Collect for All Saints**

Almighty and eternal God,  
you have kindled the flame of love in the hearts of the saints:  
grant to us the same faith and power of love,  
that, as we rejoice in their triumphs,  
we may be sustained by their example and fellowship;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
Amen.

Till next time.