

Dear Friends,

Welcome to December! This is the season of Hope.

That sometimes seems a bit difficult to believe, when all is cold and drear around us. (Or, more worryingly in this day and age, when the weather is rather too mild and unseasonable...) It may also sometimes seem difficult to believe in church, when we remove all the flowers for Advent, and hear readings about apocalyptic events which sound more terrifying than hopeful. But, nevertheless, it is – very decidedly – the season of Hope. We Christians find our hope in a small event, long ago and far away – the birth of a child. One child among billions. An event whose significance was all too easily missed, even by those in close proximity to it. An event whose significance is still missed by many in our society, and perhaps sometimes by ourselves, in our worries and our stresses, our pleasures and our purposes - even in the busyness of religion itself.

To help us reflect on Hope, we will be making it the theme of our Carol Service on December 23rd at 6.30 pm. Do try to come, and bring a friend.

The year 2008 is being used by Christians all over our country to celebrate Hope – through an initiative called HOPE 08. The aim is to encourage Christians from all kinds of denominational (and 'non-denominational') backgrounds to work together in their local communities, to create signs of the hope we have in Christ. There is an active group in Cambridge seeking to promote HOPE 08 here. A launch event is planned for the evening of Saturday 19th January, with big-name speakers, worship themed on hope, and an explanation of how we can all get involved. Do put the date in your diary now – more details later.

Among the things planned, but still to be shaped-up, are the open-air Passion Play on Holy Saturday, of which you may have heard me speak, and a weekend of community service all round the city, when Christians will be encouraged to work together on projects which will make a difference, and also offer some hospitality to people in their locality. The weekend in question is May 3rd – 5th, which just happens to be when we had planned to have a Flower Festival, anyway. We're working on how to incorporate this into HOPE 08's scheme of hospitality and service in such a way as to work with other Christians who live in our parish, but worship elsewhere. It would be good to make a real splash in Newnham!

There are also schemes afoot to have youth events in the summer holidays, and to encourage churches to offer Christians Basics courses and Lifestyle Courses, all as part of HOPE 08. Whether we will feel able to get involved in these things, I just don't know yet.

The most hopeful thing about HOPE 08, as far as I am concerned, is that its organisers really do want to work 'across the board' with Christians of all traditions, celebrating and sharing the 'hope that is in us'. There is to be no doctrinal test of 'orthodoxy' according to someone's particular view; the invitation is to churches of all types and styles to find a way to do a limited number of very practical things together. This is a bit different from simply asking us to come together to pray for unity, which happens year by year in the 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity' (January 18th – 25th). It is rather an invitation to discover and forge unity by turning outwards to the local community *together*. I do hope that St Mark's will play a full part, and that we'll meet new friends, and learn to appreciate different ways of doing things, through cooperation. Also, that this will feed into the process we're undergoing of trying to see in what ways we might need to become 'a healthier church', and how we might evolve in that direction.

There are other exciting ideas projected here for St Mark's in the New Year: I won't write about them here, as the PCC still has to approve them. (But the word 'projected' is a clue! Watch this space.)

On another small, and personal note: I find that sometimes people come to my door and push a letter through, when it might be quicker to get an answer simply by ringing the doorbell and having a chat! I know and appreciate the sensitivity which leads to people 'avoiding intruding' on the Vicarage family, but I would simply like to say that if you have the time to speak to me directly, I shall do my level best to have the time to speak to you. And, if I am occupied with another person, I shall be happy to arrange a time to meet when it's mutually convenient.

Your friend and vicar,