



**THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE
ECUMENICAL CHURCH OF OCCITANIE**
www.ourchurch.fr

The ECO Online Advent Calendar Opens Today

From this morning (1 December), the ECO Online Advent Calendar is available from the front page of our website.

Each day from now until Christmas Day, a new door will be available to open, and behind each one there is a collection of Christmas music, reflections, sketches and even a quiz as well as, every day, an item of chocolate. And if you are wondering how that is possible, go visit the calendar and see !

With Advent Calendars now available themed on everything from The Simpsons to items from the Body Shop, ECO thought it would be nice to offer a calendar themed on Christian preparation for Christmas.

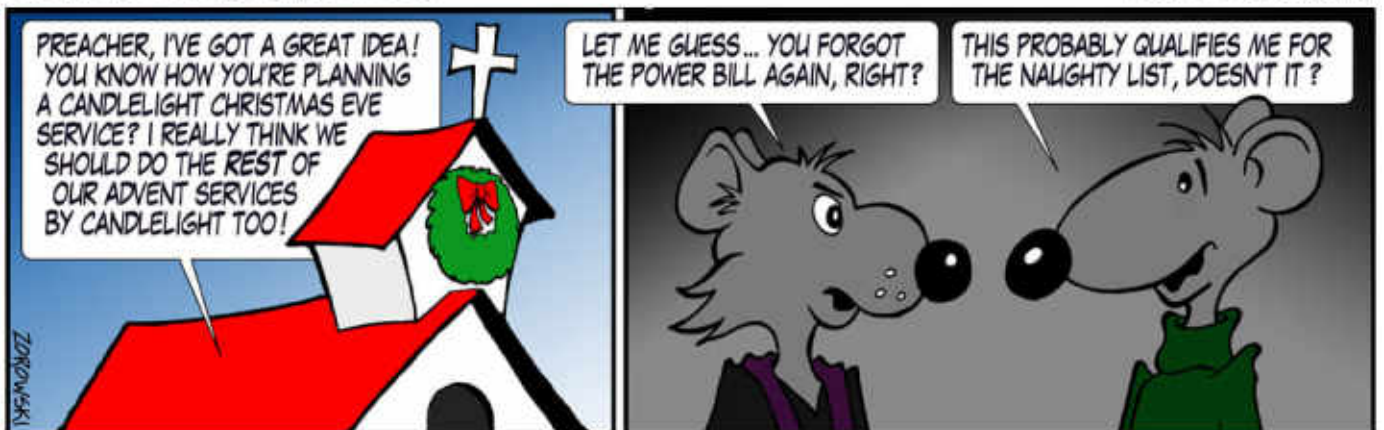
We hope that you will enjoy our Countdown to Christmas Day, and because the chocolate items are all online, they are completely non-fattening !

We are aware that copies of ECHO are now downloaded and read all over the world, and so wherever you may be when you celebrate Christmas, be it on a sunny beach, in a cosy French village, in the United Kingdom or perhaps on a snowy ski-slope, we wish you all a Joyous, Blessed and Merry Christmas and we look forward to continuing to worshipping with you in the New Year.



Church Mice

Karl Zorowski



IN LOVING MEMORY OF RALPH WORSWICK



During November, our dear friend and brother, Ralph Worswick, one of the founders of ECO, died very suddenly. There are so many lovely things we would have liked to say about Ralph, but these were very aptly expressed in the tribute given by his older son, Ian, at his funeral.

Ian has kindly given his permission for this to be reproduced below

Marcus Aurelius said it is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live.

Well Ralph/Dad certainly didn't fear to live, as everyone who knew him well could attest. Dad was always fond of telling my brother, Steven, and I that we could do anything we put our minds to, but if that's so, the words would be at least equally true of him.

As both a husband and father there could be no equal - dedicated and with an endless capacity for love, both to my mother and his sons, Steven and I, but it didn't end there.

In his professional life he was respected by colleagues and clients alike, for his unwavering honesty, and incredibly hard-working ethos, traits that are mirrored in all aspects of his life, and that he was always determined to impart to his children, for which we are and will always be eternally grateful.

Many of our passions can be attributed directly to dad, a keen and accomplished climber and sailor, he loved the outdoors, and when it came to music and comedy, he had impeccably good taste, and no small amount of skill.

Some of my earliest memories of him are of the hours he would spend playing the piano, something which always brought great contentment to himself and all who might stop to listen, and he always loved to make people laugh.

In short there really was nothing that he couldn't excel at if he was passionate about it, and I could never hope to list all his passions here, for they were many and varied.

I will leave you with another quote, one that I'm not sure Dad was even aware of, but I am certain it would have made him laugh, and that is how I would like us all to remember him. In the words of Woody Allen:

"It is not that I am afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens."



Clive and Linda Billenness add:

We were very privileged to know Ralph for the 7 years that he lived in this area, the most recent stop on what by all accounts was a globe-trotting career.

We quickly came to appreciate his gift for playing music, especially his willingness to transpose hymns into a lower key to make it easier for the musically-untrained (like us) to sing them more easily.

Over the last 18 months, since he helped to found ECO, Ralph became our 'itinerant organist', willingly travelling with his keyboard around the Occitanie to play at our in-person worship and always willing to come up with helpful suggestions about what hymns to play.

But Ralph's gifts extended beyond music.

We (and many other people) relied on Ralph's careful and thoughtful judgement to be a sounding board when we were considering new ideas for ECO, and indeed helped us to develop the Church. The words "Let's see what Ralph thinks" were frequently spoken.

As a member of our Ministry Team, Ralph regularly led worship for us, and behind the scenes, acted as ECO's Administrative Secretary for our internal meetings.

At the time of his death, we were planning how he might also extend his skills into video production of our online worship broadcasts.

Finally, it must be noted that Ralph's considerable culinary skills with his barbecue were regularly appreciated by the entire ECO Team when we met for planning meetings!

May Ralph rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.



R. S. Thomas: Poet and Priest

On 1st December the weekly Service for Healing will contain, instead of the usual Bible reading, a reading of "Healing", a poem by R. S. Thomas.

Bob Carr tells us more about his life, work and ministry

Ronald Stuart (R S) Thomas was born in Cardiff in 1913. He was educated at University College of North Wales and later undertook theological training at St Michael's College in Cardiff. He was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1936.

During his time as a rector he began to write poetry and verse. His writing career continued for fifty years during which time he produced twenty volumes of poetry. He was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1964 and nominated for the Nobel prize for Literature in 1995 (Seamus Heaney was awarded the prize). Whilst religion, understandably, was one of the major themes of his work, he also wrote about nature and about Welsh history. Thomas was a fervent and often outspoken Welsh patriot and even wrote his autobiography *Nab* (Nobody - 1985) in Welsh.

When R S Thomas died in 2000. He left a body of work that is now recognized as among the best and most important religious poetry of the twentieth century.

The poetry is not easily orthodox or pretty. Its bleak moods and near despair reflect the pull of doubt. It stands outside the mainstream of the dominant, God-affirming, sacramental poetry that looks back to Gerard Manley Hopkins's affirmation that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."

Thomas' poetry is, in many ways, an appropriate poetry for Good Friday, exemplified by his emblematic but enigmatic phrase, "The cross is always avant garde." The line is from *The Echoes Return Slow*, a long autobiographical piece written in alternating pages of prose and poetry, and it suggests that for Thomas the cross always goes before us, and it presents a radical challenge to any easy resolution of the tough questions of faith.

A cluster of recurring images, symbols, and metaphors mark Thomas's religious poems: silence, prayer, kneeling, waiting, watching, empty churches, a wound, the pierced side of Jesus, God, the natural world, a bare tree and the cross, repeatedly described by Thomas as empty or "untenanted."

Thomas is mostly interested in God's silence or absence, the *deus absconditus* or hidden God, and what that means for forging an identity in the modern world. What language might be used to address such a God in a meaningful way? Rowan Williams has written, "R.S. Thomas was—like one of the poet's spiritual mentors, Soren Kierkegaard—a "great articulator of uneasy faith.""

"In Church," a poem from Thomas's 1966 book *Pieta*, contains a powerful image of silence. Imagine going into a church when nobody else is there and taking time to listen to the silence:

Often I try
To analyse the quality
Of its silences. Is this where God hides
From my searching? I have stopped to listen,
After the few people have gone,
To the air recomposing itself
For vigil. It has waited like this
Since the stones grouped themselves about it.
These are the hard ribs
Of a body that our prayers have failed
To animate. Shadows advance
From their corners to take possession
Of places the light held
For an hour. The bats resume
Their business. The uneasiness of the pews
Ceases. There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.

This poem confronts the paradox of presence and absence, faith and doubt in a profound way. Is R S Thomas suggesting that Jesus, as Christ, even in his absence—indeed, perhaps because of, and by, his absence—symbolises and thus affirms his continuing presence?

In his later poems Thomas speaks quietly, intently, using the simplest language and sounding their compressed phrases subtly to the inner ear. From his *Collected Later Poems 1988-2000* (2004 published posthumously) comes "I think that maybe"

I think that maybe
I will be a little surer
of being a little nearer.
That's all. Eternity
is in the understanding
that that little is more than enough.

After suffering from a heart condition, R. S. Thomas passed away in 2000 at the age of 87, and was buried in Porthmadog.

On the centenary of his birth, Archbishop of Wales, Barry Morgan, who had known the poet personally, paid tribute to him:

"R. S. Thomas continues to articulate through his poetry questions that are inscribed on the heart of most Christian pilgrims in their search for meaning and truth. We search for God and feel Him near at hand, only then to blink and find Him gone. This poetry persuades us that we are not alone in this experience of faith – the poet has been there before us."

Lot House Group

Janet Varty

We changed venue this month and had a warm welcome at the home of Iona and Stephan. The Creation Service provides a pause for a drama, symbolic action, testimony or conversation. As our themed readings were around the Tree of Life our symbolic action was to write our prayer concerns on leaves for the tree. Linda (Trew) explained her choice of the Tree of Life as her business logo, so we had a mini testimony as well.



Our music this month was **As The Wind Song Through The Trees** and the very upbeat **Trees Of The Field**, it was difficult not to tap along.

We welcomed a new guest today, so thanks to everyone who came along.

Our next meeting is on 22nd December when we gather for carols and mulled wine in Puy L'Eveque.



Arghhhh!

Linda Trew

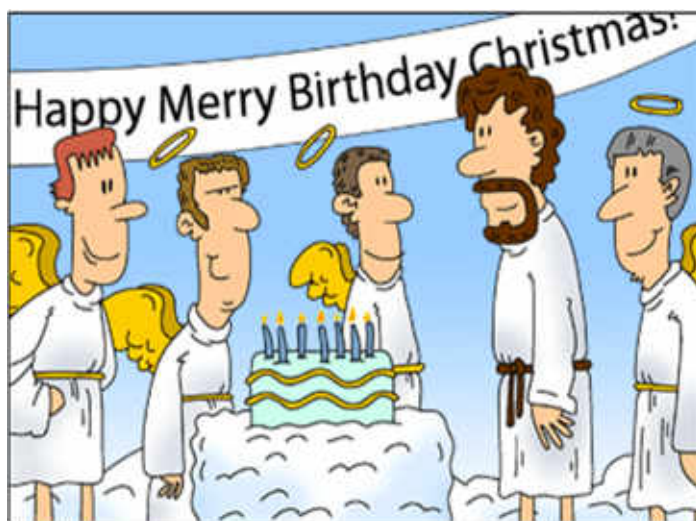
Frustrated? Overwhelmed? Angry? It's horrible, that feeling of weight we carry with negative feelings, that cloud that hovers over us, casting a shadow on any light that tries to break through. It can feel like we are trapped and just can't get out of the rut. Sometimes the lack of control over the situation can make you feel that you are on a roller coaster with no end in sight.

Life has a way at throwing challenges our way, they are inevitable, and when in the midst of them we can often feel alone. We don't want to 'burden' friends or family (when in truth we know that they would like nothing more than to be able to help us in our hour of need) instead we carry the burden alone.

For me, when times are tough there is nothing, I like more than walking in the woods with my dogs. Whatever the weather or time of day, getting out into the air, without distractions of phone or email, I simply walk and often find myself talking God, sometimes silently in my head other times out loud, and yes, I have also been known to shout at the heavens too. Today I read Psalm 139 and was so comforted by its words... 'before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord' 'Your hand will guide me; your right hand will hold me fast' 'Even the darkness will not be dark to you: the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you'. I encourage you to read the full Psalm, it is so beautiful, I pray that it brings comfort and peace to you.

Prayer

Dear God,
Thank you that I do not need special words to talk to you, or even words at all. Lord when I feel frustrated and overwhelmed, help me to remember You are here with me always. Thank you, Lord for holding me fast in your right hand. Amen.



THE ARCHANGELS ALWAYS DID THEIR BEST ON CHRISTMAS DAY


What Is It About Trees ?

Janet Varty

I am “reliably” informed from various websites that hugging a tree increases levels of hormones that help you feel calm. It apparently release serotonin and dopamine and that makes you feel happier. Some may say its hocus pocus but I am open minded and do believe in the benefits of stroking pets for example as a de-stressing technique. So why not trees?

As I understand it, the spiritual significance of trees goes back a long way, in Ancient Egypt the tree of life's branches represented the heavens and symbolised abundance. the roots reaching into the earth (death). Then, and I'm not intending any chronological order here The Buddha reached enlightenment under the sacred Bodhi tree and so it is symbolic of enlightenment and existence.

In Africa the Baobab tree, (how imprecise that is because there are 8 different types) is generally regarded as a tree of life..a provider of nourishment. There are similar motifs in in the Aztec and Mayan civilisations. I particularly noted that in Celtic culture trees were cherished for their spiritual connections to family, ancestors and deities, and came to represent the afterlife or a connection between earth and heaven. Trees were the gatekeepers to Celtic Other world, they were sacred and in the Irish language known as CRANN BETHADH.



I grew up with a grand oak tree in the garden, it seemed immense and our address was known as the House With The Big Tree. Father managed a tree house in it and friends came to clamber on it and do dare devil antics there, we spent a lot of time in that tree, it gave much pleasure, but I don't remember hugging it. I wonder if we are drawn by some deep connection to trees? Some might think I am straying into pagan territory here but not at all! The Bible has a lot to say about trees. Actually the the Bible book ends with talk of trees and there is much in between.

In Genesis chapter 2 v 8-9, we find the Tree of Life...

“And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

In Revelation 2 v7

He who has ear to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

and in

Revelation 22 v1-3

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as a crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also on the other side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.”

In Christianity, the Tree of life is a symbol of Christ Himself, giving immortality. The Cross is thought of as a tree, a place where heaven and earth come together.

Jesus links himself inextricably to the imagery of the prophet Isaiah..remember this in the prophecy Isaiah 11 v 1-2,

“A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord will rest on him- the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord--” (Jesse was the father of King David)

Then remind yourself about John chapter 15 when Jesus says “I am the real vine, and my father is the gardener...remain untied to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains with the vine.”

Do give your local trees a second glance as they are a precious part of our creation and full of spiritual imagery. If you have a favourite bible verse about trees or a tree story of your own please tell us.

The term “tree hugger” was coined in 1730 in India.

The first tree huggers were 294 men and 69 women belonging to the Bishnois branch of Hinduism, who, in 1730, died while trying to protect the trees in their village from being turned into the raw material for building a palace. They literally clung to the trees, while being slaughtered by the foresters. But their action led to a royal decree prohibiting the cutting of trees in any Bishnoi village. And now those villages are virtual wooded oases amidst an otherwise desert landscape.

Not only that, the Bishnois inspired the Chipko movement (which means “to cling”) that started in the 1970s, when a group of peasant women in Northeast India threw their arms around trees designated to be cut down. Within a few years, this tactic, also known as tree satyagraha, had spread across India, ultimately forcing reforms in forestry and a moratorium on tree felling in Himalayan regions.

MORE ABOUT TREES - THE JESSE TREE

Long before advent calendars were introduced, there was another way of counting down the days of Advent to Christmas – the Jesse Tree.

Dating back to medieval times, the Jesse Tree originates with Isaiah 11:1 - 4:

“1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD--

3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;

4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.”

The purpose of the Jesse Tree is to tell the story of the Bible from the creation until the birth of Jesus, the new branch of the tree of Jesse. Originally, they were found in carvings or stained glass windows, so that the mainly-illiterate population could learn the story from the images.

One of the most famous Jesse trees is to be found in Chartres Cathedral dating from about 1205 which describes the genealogy of Christ from the Prophet Nahum onwards.

At full size this picture is very large and incredibly detailed, so if you would like to examine it more closely on your computer, go to

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/Chartres_49-rectifi%C3%A9.jpg

In modern times, Jesse Trees are put up at Christmas, and ornaments are hung on them, one by one each day



There are many different sets of ornaments which are used, but what they all have in common is that they begin with the Creation on the first day and finish with the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day.

Sets of Jesse Tree symbols can be bought, downloaded, hand-made or even baked (as biscuits) which are then eaten each night during the last week of Advent while the O Antiphons (a series of 7 prayers) are recited each evening. (You can listen to these in our Online Advent Calendar)



Photograph: Micheletb published under a Creative Commons License BY-SA 4.0

Was Jesus really born on 25th December?

Almost certainly not.

But the story of how that date came to be chosen as His 'birthday' is one that stretches back long before His birth.



It seems to have started on the Greek island of Rhodes in 283 BC. That year the solstice fell on 25th December, and it was also the year that the Ancient World's largest Sun God statue – the 34 metre, 200 tonne Colossus of Rhodes, was consecrated.

By 46 BC, Julius Caesar had made 25th December the official winter solstice.

In AD 274, the Roman Emperor Aurelian chose the winter solstice to be the birthday of the Sun God. He also decreed that Sol Invictus (the unconquered sun) was 'Lord of the Roman Empire'.

50 years after that, and Constantine had become the first pro-Christian Roman Emperor. He wanted the Church to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ on 25th December. Perhaps it was that to him, Jesus was more or less the same person as the mighty Sun God. Or perhaps he felt that the ancient Sun God's association with goodness, light, warmth and life would help ease the people's transition from paganism to Christianity.

Whatever the reason, the Church went along with it, and chose 25th December to be the date of Christmas. And in an ancient mosaic in the crypt of St Peter's Cathedral, Jesus is portrayed as adorned with sun rays and riding in a chariot – just like Sol Invictus.

In 226 BC, 54 years after the Colossus was completed, Rhodes was struck by a powerful earthquake. Large areas of the city were severely damaged.

The Colossus was unable to withstand the stress and snapped at the knees, falling on the landward side. There it would remain for the next 800 years. The fact that the fallen statue is known to have been visible on land for several centuries has led historians to dismiss the theory of the Colossus being located on a breakwater. It also adds further evidence against the myth of the harbour-straddling Colossus, which would have collapsed into the water rather than onto land.

Ptolemy III of Egypt offered to fund the reconstruction of the statue, but, fearing they had incurred the anger of Helios, the Rhodians decided against rebuilding it.

There is only one ancient source that describes the final destruction of the fallen Colossus.

According to Theophanes the Confessor, upon capturing the island of Rhodes in 653 AD, the Muslim Caliph Muawiya I had the statue melted down and sold to a Jewish merchant from the city of Edessa. Supposedly, it took 900 fully laden camels to carry all of the reformed bronze. There are other sources that mention this event, but they can all be traced back to Theophanes.

Was Jesus really born in a stable ?

Rev'd Professor Ian Paul

Definitely not.

The idea that Jesus was born in a stable comes about from three separate considerations.

Firstly, the interpretation of Isaiah 1 v.3

"The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."

The reference to a 'manger' in St Luke's Gospel, suggesting the presence of animals, led mediaeval illustrators to depict the ox and the ass recognising the baby Jesus, so the natural setting was a stable—after all, isn't that where animals are kept? (Answer: not necessarily!)

Secondly, the translation of the Greek word 'kataluma' as 'inn'. In Luke 2 v.7 this leads to the translation

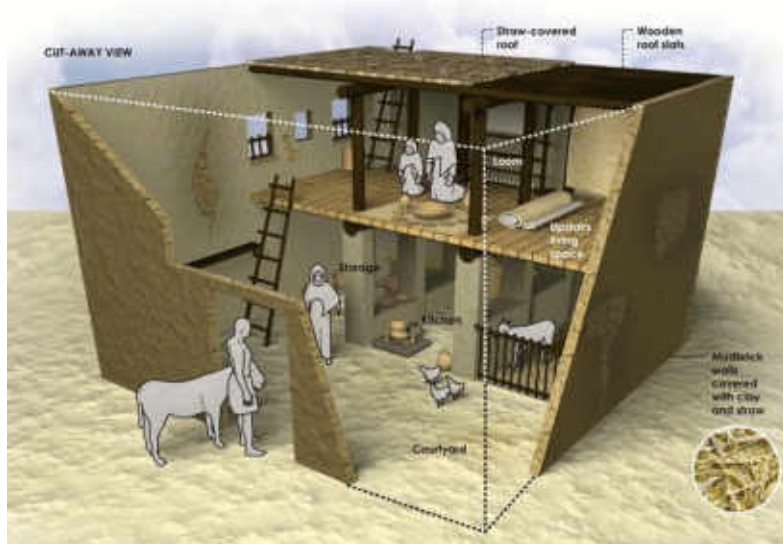
"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn"

But this does not convey the true meaning of the word. It is derived from 'kataluo' - to unsaddle or remove the pack from a horse. The word is used to refer to the private upper room where Jesus and the Disciples ate the Last Supper. In a dictionary of terminologies used in connection with ancient Trade Routes, *kataluma*, is clearly defined as a room in a private house where hospitality was given without any charge being levied.

Thirdly, there is a lack of understanding of the rules of hospitality in 1st Century Israel. Upon arrival in Bethlehem, Joseph would have been honour-bound to seek out members of his family, however distant, and they, in turn, would have been honour-bound to have offered Joseph and Mary a place to stay. Even if he had no family, any house in Bethlehem would have welcomed him because of his lineage from King David.

The house would have comprised one large room upstairs, with a hay-filled space at ground-floor level, next to the kitchen where animals were brought to be fed. This space would have been practical, safe, warm and would, of course, have contained *mangers* in which the infant Jesus could be safely laid.

So Jesus *was* laid in a manger in a stable which was downstairs from the main part of a house. It just wasn't in an inn.





A relief on the doors of the Church of Madonna della Corona, Spiazzi



Reverend Jones didn't know exactly how she had gotten in to the vicarage but she did seem very keen to audition for the Nativity Play and also said she could provide her own heavenly host

FOLLOW THE STAR

Graeme Dutton

Written in the stars
A love letter to us all
This year, more than ever
We need to heed the call

Searching for the light
We will not be alone
Gathered in front of screens,
Pages or on the phone

This year will be different
But the journey's still the same
Following the star
Listening for his name

Pathways in the desert
Shepherds watch by night
Angels proclamations
Of that coming Advent light

Please, will you follow?
Join us in our song?
The glorious day is coming
Christmas won't be long



Spotted in Durham. It seems that Christmas is coming a little early there this year.....



Some tensions arose on Christmas morning when it emerged that King Solomon had given each of his 700 wives exactly the same pair of earrings.....


ECO WORSHIP CALENDAR DECEMBER 2022 - JANUARY 2023

SUNDAY		MONDAY		TUESDAY		WEDNESDAY		THURSDAY		FRIDAY		SATURDAY	
								1	19:00	2	3		
								Online Service of Prayer for Healing					
4	10:30	5	6		19:00	7	8	19:00	9	10			
Online Morning Prayer for Advent 2				Online Service of Compline				Online Service of Prayer for Healing					
11	10:30	12	13		19:00	14	15	19:00	16	17			
Online Communion Service for Advent 3				Online Service of Compline				Online Service of Prayer for Healing					
18	10:30	19	20		19:00	21	22	19:00	23	24		17:00	
Online Festival of Carols and Christmas Readings				Online Service of Compline				Online Service of Prayer for Healing				Christmas Eve Crib Service	
25	10:30	26	27				28	29		30	31		
Christmas Day Online Communion													
JANUARY 2023													
1			2	3			4	5	6		7		
								January Edition of ECHO published					
								19:00 - Online Service of Compline					

Please note - We will not be broadcasting between 26 December 2022 and 4 January 2023 to enable us to perform our regular studio equipment systems maintenance. Our first service of 2023 will be a Service of Compline at 19:00 on 5 January. The January edition of ECHO will be published on the same day and will contain details of services during the rest of January. The online diary of our website will be kept up to date throughout this period.


9 Lessons learned at Carol Services which is why the ECO Online Carol Service may suit you better (with thanks to Dave Walker)

①




YOU NEED TO GET THERE EARLY IF YOU WANT TO GET A GOOD SEAT

②




PARKING SPACES CAN BE VERY HARD TO COME BY

③




THE WORLD-WIDE CANDLE SHORTAGE DOESN'T SEEM TO HAVE KICKED IN YET

④



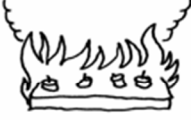
THE SERVICE SHEET LOOKS REMARKABLY SIMILAR TO LAST YEAR'S.

⑤




THE CAROL SINGING IS DEFINITELY IMPROVED IF EVERYONE HAS COPIES WITH THE SAME WORDS ON

⑥




OASIS IS HIGHLY FLAMMABLE, SO FLOWER ARRANGERS SHOULD BE STRONGLY DISCOURAGED FROM PUTTING CANDLES IN IT

⑦




YOUNG CHILDREN DO NOT PARTICULARLY APPRECIATE THE READING OF 9 LESSONS

⑧



PARENTS DO NOT FIND IT EASY TO RESTRAIN YOUNG RESTLESS CHILDREN DURING THE READING OF 9 LESSONS

⑨



YOU RUN THE RISK OF CATCHING COVID OR WORSE STILL, SPREADING IT

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