

Letter #86 Personal Christmas letter from Angus to the Church family

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,
*"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
**because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.**"* (Luke 1:76-79)

Looking up to God's tender mercy

Against the background of the harshness of "cancel culture" and the fact that forgiveness is almost non-existent on social media platforms within our society, it is so refreshing to read in Luke 1:78 of the "tender mercy of our God". "Tender" translates the word that is used for "insides" or "bowels" and which is sometimes translated "compassion". It describes the very deepest emotions of God. To any of us who are feeling at a distance from Him and perhaps labouring under the misapprehension that God is looking at us with disapproval, then Luke 1:78 is a wonderfully warm encouragement for us to come to our senses and to be reminded of the Lord's genuine and real affections towards us.

How will God's tender mercy be revealed? The verse proceeds by using an illustration. God's tender mercy is like the warmth of the sun rising upon us on a cold day. Without the sun, we shiver and curl up. Yet when we feel the warmth of the sun on our face, it cheers and encourages us. And yet this is far more than an illustration, since the rising sun is a reference to the Lord Jesus himself. Glancing back to Micah 4:2 "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays" – a beautiful line picked up by Charles Wesley in the final verse of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing". God's tender mercy is revealed in the person of the Lord Jesus. Amidst all the uncertainties of life and the struggles we may be experiencing, my prayer is that each of us would know the warmth of Jesus' love in an ever greater measure over this Christmas period.

Looking back with gratitude

As Sue and I look back on this last year, there are so many things for which we wish to give thanks. First, we are so grateful for the manner in which the church family marked our 20th anniversary of ministry at St Nicholas during the summer. It has been a privilege to be involved in leading the church family over this period, but an even greater privilege simply to be a member and to know the love and support of so many over such a sustained period. We were overwhelmed by your generosity marked both by a very precious card and a generous gift. Second, we are also very grateful for your understanding of my various health issues and the restrictions and limitations this has caused over the last year or two. Third, we are especially grateful for the way in which so many of the church family have warmly embraced changes over the last year, whether in relation to our congregational model, the new nurture groups or in other ways. We also continue to thank God for the way in which he has worked through us as a church family to supply all our financial needs.

Looking forward with hope and expectation

In this coming year, we will be celebrating the 900th Anniversary of the first recorded documentary evidence of St Nicholas, Sevenoaks. The *Textus Roffensis* (1122) includes the first reference to the church. Under the tag "StN@900" you will see several initiatives that are being co-ordinated by Gordon McKechnie and David Killingray with assistance from others including Abby Chilton. As we look forward, we do want to rejoice in God's faithfulness to us as a church over the centuries.

As we look forward, we will also want to focus on making Jesus known and Nic Ross and I will be leading Hope Explored starting Monday 17th January 2022 on Zoom and it would be wonderful if many are able to join us. I wonder if there is a friend, neighbour, or colleague whom you could invite? Later in the Spring we will be joining with many other churches across the country in A Passion for Life. We already have one date booked in the diary – Monday 28th March 2022 in the evening, where we will be hosting a visit from Rory Steyn, who will speak about his faith in the Lord Jesus and about his work as a personal bodyguard for the late President Nelson Mandela. There's certainly lots to look forward to in this coming year!

Finally, a song and a prayer

Especially given the new concerns raised by the Omicron variant this beautiful new song, '[The Night Song](#)' (by Cityalight), may help us as we cope with our fears and anxieties.

The prayer this week is the **Collect for Christmas Eve:**

Almighty God, you make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of your Son Jesus Christ: grant that, as we joyfully receive him as our redeemer, so we may with sure confidence behold him when he shall come to be our judge; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Warmly in Christ,

Angus MacLeay