

Vicar's Vista - Church Growth Feb 06

“Will you share with me in the regular study and proclamation of God’s word, that together we may bring the light of faith to a dark world, kindle the fire of love in a cold world, and open the door of hope in a tired world?” That’s what I asked on 25th January and I heard you respond, “With the help of God we will.”

So that’s settled – here are eight changes that led to growth (according to Bob Jackson’s research, published in his new book *Road to Growth*, 0-7151-4073-6 Church House Publishing): -

- 1) Planting congregations
- 2) Worship less formal, more relaxed; better music
- 3) Better provision for children and young people (family services, better groups, paid staff)
- 4) Improving welcome and integration – front door
- 5) Better small groups and pastoral care – back door
- 6) Regular use of evangelism courses as part of an evangelisation and incorporation strategy
- 7) More lay involvement in leadership
- 8) Improvements to buildings



I think we’re already moving positively forwards on most of these issues. We are not strong enough to plant - yet! Churches should plant when they are over 85% full and are over 150 strong in any congregation, apparently. We have a good mix of formal and informal music and we are developing our ‘family services’ in a relaxed and informal style. Sunday school has restarted and there is good provision for young families mid-week. Noel has told us that his bank have also discovered that covering the ‘front door’ is vital – we are establishing welcomers for each service. We are starting LPA training courses to improve our ‘back door’ provision. Alpha is now an established part of our evangelisation programme and we will set up other courses with your support. Anybody wanting to increase his or her involvement in any aspect of our shared life is most welcome to approach me. Lastly, importantly, we must now push on with plans, already agreed by our PCC to improve the church and agree plans on extending the annex to provide, kitchen, toilets and more room. God is with us!

Andrew

Home Groups and Pastorates Feb 06

“Will you share with me in the regular study and proclamation of God’s word...?”

It’s the same question I posed elsewhere in the Church Growth article. Home Groups are at the centre of most lively and growing churches. If we voluntarily sub-divided ourselves into groups of about twelve persons we would cover every current church member however active, or otherwise. What’s it all about - we’ve never had these *Groups* before! Oh yes we have, it’s just something the Church has forgotten about over the years. In a Small Home Group each person matters and should not be lost. Pastoral care is better, there’s a forum for personal growth. We can study the bible together, discuss and enjoy a relaxed and wholly Christian environment. Into these groups we can invite others who are on the fringe of the church, friends, neighbours - those who cannot make Sundays. It will encourage them!



I would want these Small Groups to meet bi-weekly, except in holiday times - each group could make their own arrangements. On the alternate weeks several Home Groups would meet with others in a Pastorate Meeting of say 30 people. At this there could be informal worship, prayer and shared study because the group would be large enough. The Pastorates would be led by lay pastors from among the congregation (that’s the increased lay participation that Ven. Bob Jackson is talking about in his book on Church Growth).

I’m ambitious to enable this to happen and so I ask for those who can squeeze about 8-12 persons in their home to offer hospitality. I’m asking that you think seriously about this. We need lay leaders and facilitators to step forwards. It is not onerous! I know that we all have busy lives and/or this is a change to our current routine.

I think the best way forward is to write to each of you asking your opinion, and if you are in agreement as to which days/evenings you are able to meet. Those who have done *Alpha* please spread the Gospel about Small Groups! It was fun, relaxed & worthwhile wasn’t it? A.R.

Vicars' Vista March 2006

Lord, bless this house!

What a wonderful celebration we shared as Bishop Tim and more than thirty clergy including three Archdeacons, no less, honoured us with their presence on Wednesday 25th January for my Collation as Vicar of the Parish of West Moors.



I realise not all were able to attend, also including some of my family and friends – but thanks to Baird Oldrey and his team we have a wonderful CD (or Video) available of the grand occasion. Many thanks to everyone, churchwardens, musicians, catering, cleaners, florists, participants and most of all your very selves for making the ‘Celebration of New Ministry’ such a wonderful evening. The Lord’s house was ‘joy-full’ – full, and full of joy. Praise God from whom all blessings flow...

We are well established in the Vicarage and settling in nicely – as I write Zahra is out in the garden in the evening gloom – I hope I can fetch her back-in when it gets really dark! We really enjoyed ‘Vicarage Party No. 1’ as read the icing on the cake, donated by our neighbour (Sue Oldrey) and all the pastries cakes and gifts you all brought to our open house after church on Sunday 12th Feb. Thanks to the Mothers Union for their help and others including the Smith’s who stayed behind to clear up. Yes, the carpets survived and are still gleaming white as Olly Smith laid them (Tel: 0783 792 7802 - for preferential rates, mention VICAR).

About thirty of you witnessed the official request for God’s blessing on our new home – for those who missed it the editor asked me to provide an account...

I recalled the role water has in our life. God separated water and earth at creation, and our bodies are mostly water. God purified the Earth through the Great Flood; God parted the Red Sea for Moses and the Children of Israel to evade the Egyptians. God parted the River Jordan

and Joshua led the Hebrews into the Promised Land. God appointed John the Baptist to declare baptism as a ritual purification for turning away from sin and back towards Him. Later Jesus came for Baptism at the start of his ministry, through our Baptism by water and spirit we offer our lives back to God and now we pray His blessing on the water that will be used to symbolise his blessing in every part of this home – may it be a place where Christ is known and loved, a place of love and peace. So then with a bowl of Holy Water and a sprig of Rosemary, representing the herb Hyssop (see Psalm 51) we went into each room telling of whose room it was and what it was for and asking God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to bless each person, John, Christopher, Hannah, Zahra, myself and then all the guests who were promptly then splashed – so that they could really feel God’s blessing!

Years ago I taught my niece and God-daughter, Ameerah, a simple Grace before meals – she is now nine and always uses it:-

May God bless this food.

May God Bless this house.

May God Bless us all. Amen.

Let this be our prayer – Blessed are you Lord God of all Creation, through your goodness with have this food, this house and each other! O Lord, open thou my lips and my mouth will declare Your praise...

We are so pleased to welcome new friends and families in church and this is the ultimate blessing, that God is calling new people to his house. The Lord, our God is faithful and it is His will to bless His house and His people – my joy is that in His service I am appointed to declare God’s blessing.

May God Bless You

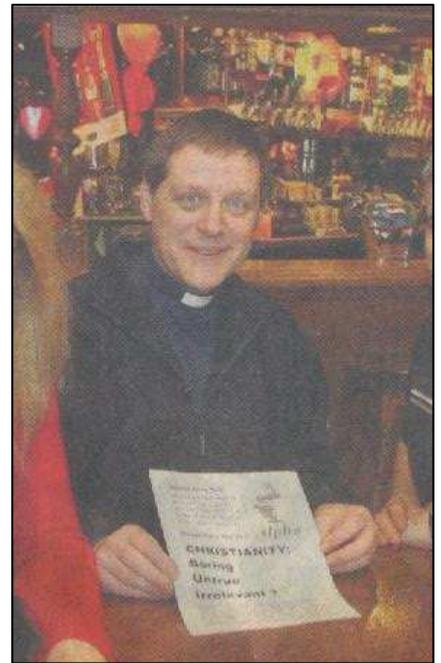
Love in Christ - Andrew

Vicars' Vista April 2006

Are you able to drink this cup? (Matt 20:22)

It has been an unusual Lent this year! God has sent me into Pub's and Hotels, where there has been plenty of food and drink in evidence.

Also, in the absence of our long-awaited new oven, neighbours have been most kind in feeding us. Now I've received an email about the Aldhelm Pilgrimage led by our Bishop Tim in May. Guess what – it is a veritable list of Public Houses and choice hostelries! Far be it



for me to hereby publicly confess to gluttony etc., for the photograph above is evidence of my missionary activity. It was taken at a local Pub with the newspaper headline (Daily Echo) "There is room in this Inn for Jesus." In my defence I cite Matthew 11:19 and ask for it to be taken into consideration. Thank you to those who have been praying for Alpha in the Pub. (The next course will begin on 2nd May with plenty of food and drink - both physical and spiritual).

Whilst the religious people were putting on a show of their religiosity and using it to have power over others lives, so Jesus was intent on revealing the meaning of faith and interpreting scripture to bring understanding that both empowers and frees-up his followers. Even those close to him first thought it was all about gaining an advantage for themselves. Jesus states quite clearly that his followers have to be servants – (literally slaves) and not try to Lord it over others. The power of God is expressed in humility and weakness. Father God is interested in all and so Jesus went amongst 'sinners' eating and drinking. In my case I think it might be a sinner eating and drinking amongst others! We provoked some barracking in the pub recently – things like "**** they've brought church into the Pub now – I come here to get away from all that ****!" I've found it a bit less 'religious' in these public places, and slightly uncomfortable in Lent. Thankfully my colleague Revd. Lawrie Clow guided me admirably in guarding against over- piousness, which can rear its head during this season.

In following the Tradition of the Christian Year, the Lenten observances, Passiontide and the various liturgies of Holy Week so we do seek to drink of 'the cup' that Christ holds up to each of us. We drink from a cup that is offered as an example, a cup that is offered by host to guest, a shared cup that reminds us of Christian community. It is also a cup of service and self-sacrifice. Jesus knew that his disciples would drink of his cup – that to enter into His Kingdom they would choose this cup with all that entailed.

I pray that as I and my supporters (many thanks to them) go around and about that we will be offering a new kind of cup that many will choose to drink from in response to Jesus Christ who ate and drank amongst sinners and gave his life as a ransom for many – who died and rose again to new life so that we may might enter into The Kingdom of God.

At Easter we pass through death to self and rise to new life in Christ and we re-affirm our followership of The Way. We eat this bread and drink this cup; being no longer hungry or thirsty we offer this food and drink to others. We have plenty to share and offer from our surplus to others.

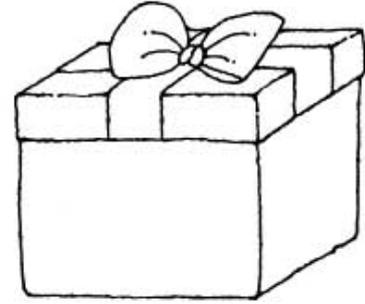


Many thanks to those who have been able to respond to my invitation to train for Lay Pastoral Ministry. A course that includes candidates from other churches in our Deanery will begin at the end of April. We also meet on 27th April for the Annual Parochial Church Meeting at which the new Parochial Church Council will be elected. There is much to offer to God in prayer and please include the ongoing work amongst young families and children. God bless you all this Easter.

Christ is risen. Alleuia! Your servant in his name, Andrew Rowland

Vicars' Vista May 2006

'Love is something if you give it away'



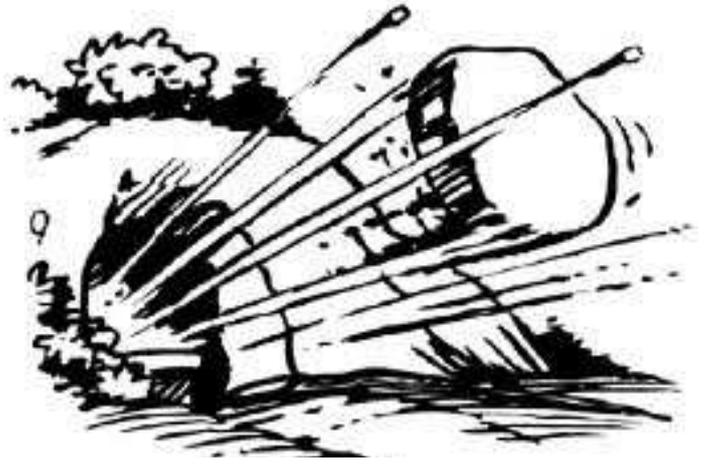
The story goes that some time ago a man punished his 5-year old daughter for wasting a roll of expensive gold wrapping paper. Money was tight and he became even more upset when the child pasted the gold paper so as to decorate a box to put under the Christmas tree. Nevertheless, the little girl brought the gift box to her father the next morning and said, "This is for you daddy." The father was embarrassed by his earlier over reaction, but his anger flared up again when he found the box was empty. He spoke to her in a harsh manner, "Don't you know, young lady, when you give someone a present there's supposed to be something inside the package?"

The little girl looked up at him with tears in her eyes and said, "Oh, daddy, it's not empty, I blew kisses into it until it was full." The father was crushed. He fell on his knees and put his arms around this little girl and he begged her to forgive him for his unnecessary anger.

An accident took the life of the child only a short time later and it is told that the father kept the gold box by his bed for all the years of his life. And whenever he was discouraged or faced difficult problems he would open the box and take out an imaginary kiss and remember the love of a child who had put it there.

In a very real sense, each of us as human beings have been given a golden box filled with unconditional love and kisses from our children, family and friends. There is no more precious possession anyone could hold. Love is something when you give it away!

We have also received the gift of love from God the Father, through the life, death and glorious resurrection of the Son, Jesus Christ. The wrapping paper God used was better than Gold, the box (tomb) was at first found to be empty – but only because Christ had risen and the love of God enabled to



The tomb – a gift-box?

pour out into the world. When Jesus ascended to heaven, so the Holy Spirit of God was sent into the world to ensure that whenever we want to, we could pick-up ‘God’s golden gift-box’, open it and receive his unconditional love.

It seems in our story that the father was a little too ‘wrapped-up’ in himself and hadn’t quite got the spirit of Christmas at all. I suppose we can draw a parallel here also, that when God became man, it was seen by many as a box without proper content and so his offering was also rejected with horrible consequences for Jesus. In the same way we need to fall on our knees and beg God the Father for forgiveness and then recognising our error, joyously pick up the golden gift-box and remember that, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believed in him may not perish but have eternal life.” This promise was costly and so we remember Jesus day by day, through prayer, bible reading and meeting together as church.

I pray that you will know the love of God in your life – if not, don’t wait for some ‘christmas’! Fortunately God, Our Father is much more patient and loving than the father in this story. Contact me and I’ll fetch you your personalised gift-box straight away! I have much love to give away in the name of Jesus Christ – it’s my job!

Happy Eastertide!

Andrew Rowland

Vicars' Vista June 2006

‘On The Look Out...’

Here’s the view from the pulpit at St Mary’s, back on the 14th May, in holiday mood I took some photos. I don’t know if they’re all smiling for the photograph, or because of the sermon content – I’m not really



sure, but at least none were caught having a nap! I’m away for a busman’s holiday to Charmouth and the Golden Cap area on a mission with our Bishop Tim. Our *Aldhelm Pilgrimage* this year is to raise the profile of Jesus through the many churches of the team, centred around Whitchurch Canonorum. We are doing this by washing cars and all sorts of slightly unusual stunts – and I’m afraid also going into pubs and other eateries. It’s a holiday with a difference! We hope to give folk the chance to see the church through different eyes, a new vista.

Then Zahra and I fly off to Lebanon, principally to see Zahra’s mum who suffered a debilitating stroke in January. I’ll have to brush up my Arabic language, it’s four years since we were last there and that was following twenty years absence. Language skills fade if you don’t put them into practice. I will have to listen twice as hard and sustaining one’s concentration is taxing and the potential for misunderstanding significant.

So I pray, God give me eyes to see and ears to hear, and sense to understand and interpret what my senses provide me. Not just in my travels, but also in perceiving your will for me and my own.

With the Lord’s help I’ll be back, no doubt with lots of those *the Vicar has been on holiday* type stories! God Bless you all.

A’ salaam aleykum (peace be with you)

- Andrew Rowland

Vicar's Vista July 2006

'The Table Is Set...'

Summer has arrived and it's a chance for some time with others and in my household that means a table that is set with delicious food for our guests to enjoy.

This is a photograph of one of the many feasts Zahra and I enjoyed on our trip back home at the end of May. Lebanese food is the best and healthiest in the world.



Their diet is low in meat, full of salads, fresh vegetables, olive oil, garlic, fibre and best of all tree-ripened fruit. It is truly a land flowing with milk and honey and now recovered from the disastrous civil war of the mid '70s. Many of you know that Zahra's mother Zienab is quite unwell, having suffered a debilitating stroke. Amongst the joy of seeing all the family after five years, it was difficult to see Mum in poor health. It is part of the human condition that in the midst of joy there is often sadness. The farewells, which might be goodbye, were particularly hard.

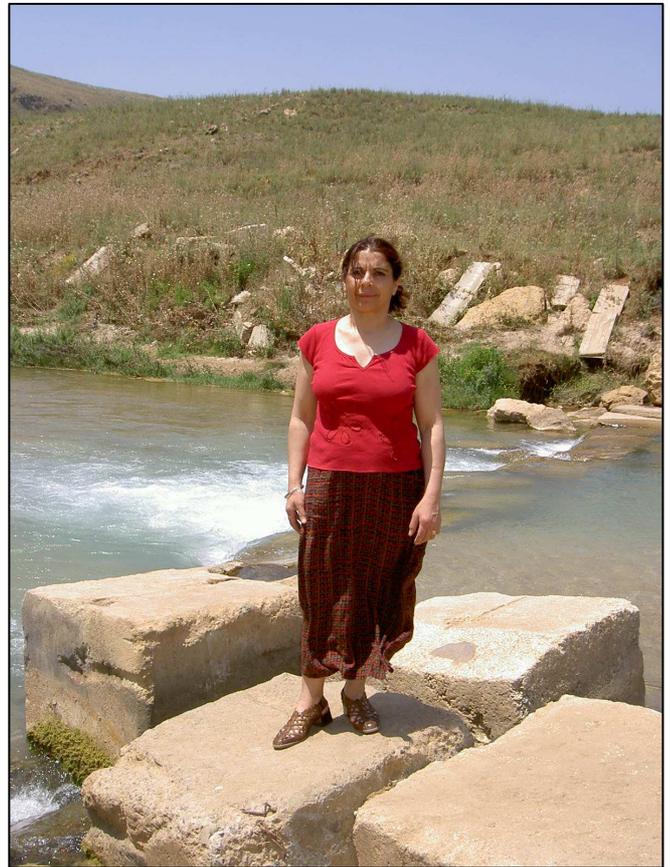
Having said farewell we can always have hope for a reunion and it is with much joy we announce that Ian and Christine Chisholm are going to worship with us on Sunday 9th July (Ian will preach). Afterwards there will be a barbeque in their honour at 61 Glenwood Road.

I'm looking forward to my second summer in West Moors, the first at the Vicarage. Zahra and I are busy planning, seeding, and planting, both in the church and the garden and enjoying the growth we see all around us. The table is set and our cup runneth over...to God be the Glory great things he is doing! Now I must get packing, I'm off 'gallivanting' to Springhead on a St Mary's school residential trip... The table of the Kingdom is set for us! With every blessing – Andrew.

Vicar's Vista *Sept 2006*

The River Litani, Lebanon (June '06)

This is a photograph of Zahra taken standing on some ancient stones in a river that has become famous for all the worst reasons. The river Litani has often become a border running through the middle of Southern Lebanon up to which Israel has invaded. These past few weeks have been very traumatic for us both, as we watched with horror the death and destruction of the conflict between Hizbollah (= *party of God*) and Israel (= *struggles with God*).



The home in which last month's photograph of the meal table was taken is now reduced to rubble, along with thousands of others. Our family have survived this war, but numerous innocents of the region have been killed and injured - scarred for life both physically and mentally.

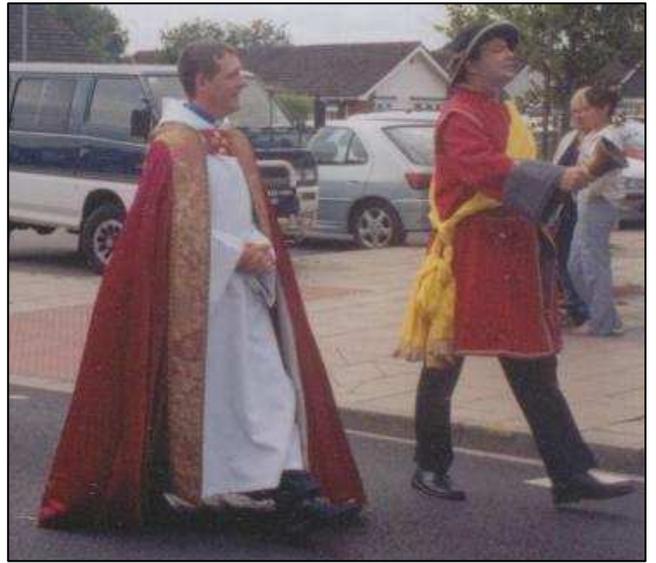
How tragic that this has happened, how ungodly is this violence! Politicians, warlords, fundamentalists, generals, terrorists and clerics come and they go, and what mark do they leave on the world? How dried-up is their river bed! The mark of God is revealed in the total self-giving love of Jesus Christ. Only those thirsty for Godliness, for righteousness, will receive water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. There is a worship song (*'Down the Mountain'*) which has a very upbeat chorus: - *The river of God sets our feet a-dancing, The river of God fills our hearts with cheer, The river of God fills our mouths with laughter, And we rejoice for the river is here!*

The Litani River, like the love of God will continue to flow as empires and the generations pass. Just as sure as water is wet, God is love and anyone who misunderstands this misses out on the cheer and laughter and joy of the spring of the water of life. Love in Christ - Andrew

Vicar's Vista October 2006

“Oh Yea, Oh Yea! West Moors is the best Parish in the Village!” (sic)

...this is what our new Town Cryer proclaimed in full voice as we processed from The Petwyn to Fryers Field. The joy of the occasion of the Jubilee, the celebration of fifty years of the Parish Council had obviously overcome the man! Humbly representing the Ecclesiastical Parish with double his standing plus ten years I corrected him thus; “West Moors, the best Parish in the County”... we must not confuse the good people of our fair abode.



It was with much joy that Churches Together in West Moors earlier that same morning had clearly proclaimed the message of Christ to a gathered throng of well over two hundred. Pastor John Parsons (and the good people of Pinehurst Chapel) took the lead and the Lord withheld rain and storm. It was rather fun to see his words blowing off the temporary lectern, the clothes pegs not able to restrain the papers being blown by strong gusts of wind. Was it not the word of God sweeping out from the assembly of the faithful I mused?

I pray that we can clearly share our faith, that the winds and gusts of life will not deflect us; that we can withstand some blowing about. The words of our faith, in the love of God revealed in Jesus - the *Ruach*, the breath of wind of God - the Holy Spirit - needs to blow for and through us into our community. God bless West Moors the best Parish in the Village, the best Village in the Parish and the best Village and Parish in the County.

May we all boldly parade our faith, may we be clear in proclaiming the true Gospel – Oh Yea, Oh Yea! God is the best, the only God in the parish, in the village, in the County and to the ends of the universe!

Greetings in Christ Jesus - Andrew

Vicar's Vista November 2006

Taking Stock

My mother dropped by the other day – she'd been having a clear out. "You might find these interesting"...and handed me a thick envelope containing my school reports from the age of eleven to sixteen!



Amazingly I had just been commiserating with someone during the day that my school reports always said something along the lines of, "Andrew would do better if he tried harder". What a coincidence?



I don't know about you, but it was a time of fear and trepidation each term when the report went home. No matter how hard one tried (or not) put simply, some teachers could not be impressed – or so it seemed to my young mind. They summed you up by the end of the first week and you were duly exalted or condemned. Later I began to suspect that teachers discussed pupils in the staff room and you were a 'marked man' right from the outset of a new school year! How silly!

The funny thing is when I looked back; my best marks were for English, Religious Education and Music/drama – just what you need to be a good Vicar, eh? I think the biggest irony is that subsequently I've happily ended up putting so much time into schools, even though aged 16 I couldn't wait to leave! Reading my old school reports has been fun and illuminating. It would be far too embarrassing to reveal many of the comments – although for a donation to church funds I might.

Taking stock of our lives is a good thing to do. As Christians we need to be self-aware. Aware of our words and works – that they should encourage, enable and heal. We should not judge others, rather we should judge ourselves. And if after due consideration we feel that we could do better, then we should try harder, not primarily for ourselves, but for others – for those who the ultimate teacher, Jesus, gave his everything. The one thing about The Teacher I have realised is that He knows best and He knows me better than I know myself.

Yours, on report, still learning, (still trying?) Andrew C+

Vicars' Vista December 2006

Are you an actor or a player? This is the Question.

I was listening to the political debate resulting from the outcome of the USA elections where the Republicans were, “Hung out to dry” (quoting Donald Rumsfeld the Defence Secretary who subsequently resigned). The main election issue; President Bush’s Iraq War policy and Rumsfeld’s implementation. The voters have swept the Republicans ‘out’ and the Democrats ‘in’. They have spoken on the issue, although it seems hard to figure a positive way forward in Iraq. Sir Christopher Meyer (former British Ambassador in Washington) posed this question that he felt should now be foremost in the re-formulation of American and British policy.

His point was that we have to discern who are just ‘actors’ and who are actually ‘players’ in the conflict. We have to talk and negotiate with the players – they cannot be ignored. We must speak with Iran and Syria. In the same way the Israelis and Palestinians must talk and negotiate. Not to do so – to ignore and try to exclude the ‘other’ only exacerbates the problem. We can discount the actors, but we cannot ignore the players.

Thinking spiritually, rather than politically I pose the question to each of us as we variously engage with these next two months, when we celebrate Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Are we actors – just part of the show? Are we players – engaged with the actuality of what it means that God became flesh and lived amongst us? God became a player; he engaged with mankind, he entered into the events (spiritually and politically). Jesus demands a response of each person – are you an actor, or are you a player? Actors make a show and go along with the events; they are not true to themselves or towards others. Players engage and participate – one could say they are trying to be sincere.

The Christian Way is a response to God in Jesus Christ. It is by the Holy Spirit that we progress from Actor to Player. You don’t have to wait for an election to vote for God. Just come to Him! Don’t get swept away!

Blessings to you in His name. Andrew